

NEW YORK

August 3-16, 2020

Back to School



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impossible
planning project.**

(It's not going well.)

By Keith Gessen

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Stuyvesant
High School
before
COVID.

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SETH ROGEN

An
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STREAMING
AUGUST 6

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PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED
PG-13
SOME LANGUAGE AND RUDE HUMOR.
Some Material May Be Inappropriate for Children Under 13

Tribute



“It’s Gonna Be Great!” John Homans (1958–2020)

JOHN HOMANS EDITED FEATURES AT *New York* for not quite 20 years, from 1994 to 2014. A disproportionate number of our most memorable stories came through his hands, and the shape and sound and worldview and talent pool of this place would have been immeasurably lessened without him. John died on July 29, at 62, and the tributes from colleagues past and present immediately started pouring in. Here, a tiny selection, with far more at *nymag.com*.

Ariel Levy (*writer*): He was not so much your editor as your guru. I didn’t just trust him to tell me what to do with a story; I trusted him to tell me what to do with my life.

Joe Hagan (*writer*): He was a vision-quest editor: He gave you a mandate, in this oracular style that’s hard to describe. When I was tired, depressed, demoralized, he’d say, “Oh, this is the sport of kings, man! We’re lucky! This is the great fortune—the world is ours to go have fun with!” Then you’d turn in a manuscript and he’d always say the same thing: “It’s gonna be great!” And it’s the worst thing you can say, but it also gives you hope!

Gabriel Sherman (*writer*): “It’s gonna be great!” Which means it’s a fucking disaster. But he knows it’ll be great, because he’ll fix it. [On my first story for *New York*] I hadn’t heard from him—*are they gonna kill it?*—and this edit comes back, and, I mean, I still don’t know how he did it. Completely transformed.

Adam Moss (*editor-in-chief, 2004–2019*): He would roll his eyes—he had an amazingly jaundiced view of everything, totally irreverent, totally sarcastic—but it was with an incredible amount of affection. A strange mix of cynicism and awe.

Christopher Bonanos (*editor*): You never saw anybody work the way he did. You’d pass his office and hear muttering: *Mmmhuhhh, okay, what the fuck am I doing now, okay, hmmm, uh, yeah, all right, now what hmmm yeah.* The key sentence, the one we regularly heard leaping out of the stream of noise, was *What the fuck?* Which meant, *Okay, what do I do next?*

Chris Smith (*writer*): Anyone who worked with John can cite Homansisms. The most common is probably “*Excellente!*” When I was learning to be a political columnist, he told me, “It’s good to be right. But you always need to be interesting.”

Eric Konigsberg (*writer*): “It’s a straight shot” meant to report the hell out of something and let the material point the way. “As an activity, it’s a bowl of candy” was a way of reminding you to have fun.

Geoffrey Gray (*writer*): The goal was always to achieve “good sport.”

Caroline Miller (*editor-in-chief, 1996–2004*): John was brilliant at editing without putting his fingers on the keyboard. If a story wasn’t working, he could talk the writer through.

Jada Yuan (*writer*): His was a universal, gender-neutral, age-agnostic sink-or-swim policy. If he found you at all semi-capable and you came to him with an idea, his general response was “Why not?”

Carl Swanson (*writer-editor*): His attitude seemed to be: *Do it yourself if you can—you might not have the talent, but you might.*

Jared Hohlt (*editor*): He did his job with such wit and sly wisdom. He did it so creatively—and quickly. He *yelled* creatively.

Amy Larocca (*writer*): We never got into one of his legendary scream-a-thons, but I was a great fan of listening in. “Take some fucking words out! It’s like a fucking Victorian living room in there.”

Steve Fishman (*writer*): Once, we argued about a single word in my draft. I don’t recall which. It got so loud that it frightened the interns who sat outside his office, as they later told me.

David Haskell (*editor-in-chief, 2019–present*): He left *New York* six years ago, but he probably still deserves a salary because I think about him every time we close an issue.

Mark Jacobson (*writer*): Got a text from Homans the other day. Usually, he just calls and says, “What’s going on there?” But this said, “Looks like curtains. I’m in Sinai.” For a moment, I thought he meant the Sinai Peninsula, doing a rewrite of the Ten Commandments, ripping out some of the more arcane numbers.

Vanessa Grigoriadis (*writer*): The first time I walked into *New York Magazine*, I heard John Homans screaming at some hapless writer on the phone. I vowed to steer clear of him. Then my boss left and Homans inherited me as his assistant. At night, I would go into our publishing system and read the stories that had been filed to him and then I would read the revised story when it came out in the magazine. He could drop three sentences into an eight-page piece and transform it. When he called, you wanted him to yell “You scored!” or “This is pure poetry” instead of “It’s like nail soup, Vanessa. Just keep working on it, and eventually we’ll have soup.”

In more recent years, I wasn’t as nervous about Homans’s calls. I knew when my story was good or bad or unprintable. I wish we had more time together, but most writers don’t get 24 years with an editor, let alone an honest, loyal, kind friend. When I called him last week, he announced, “I’m fucked. I’m a goner.” And we both knew it was true.

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Intelligencer

INSIDE: *Michael Brown's mother* / *100 people on an alfresco summer* / *Senator Warren's power play*



A protester is arrested on July 24 in Portland, Oregon.

Empires: **Zak Cheney-Rice**

Law and Order and Chaos

Trump's authoritarian theater was just for show, until it wasn't.

GENERAL-ELECTION SEASON typically announces itself with a handful of reliable signposts—veepstakes rumors, dueling party conventions, more frequent campaign rallies in contested states. The presidency of Donald Trump has occasioned a new one: the deployment of militarized federal forces on American soil. Their presence in Portland, Oregon (and at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2018), is more than a flex of authoritarian muscle. It marks, for Trump, the establishment of an election-year ritual, a political strategy ripe for replication anytime he faces the will of the voters. Especially if he thinks he might lose.

With three months to go until Election Day, the president is seeing some of the worst polling numbers of his tenure. Eight in ten Americans think the country is heading in the wrong direction, and just 38 percent say the national economy is good, down from 67 percent in January, according to a recent survey conducted by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs

Research. Trump now trails Joe Biden in several national general-election polls by double-digit margins, and he has watched his AP-NORC poll approval rating for his handling of the pandemic plummet to 32 percent.

None of this means he can't win in November. But it does mean that he has lost control of the era's defining crisis—the capable management of which could have prevented mass death, soothed an economic convulsion, and wrapped Trump's incumbent's advantage in plated armor. Absent these outcomes, he's instead pursuing his timeworn tactic of trying to scare people into voting for him. Polling indicated transpartisan support for Black Lives Matter protesters, but images of dissident-packed thoroughfares and business districts aflame—in Democratic-run cities, no less—were fertile ground for demagoguery, and Trump couldn't resist. His first inclination was toward strongman theatrics. On June 1, after a conference call during which he urged state governors to “dominate” protesters (and threatened to send in the military if they could not), his administration used police to clear a pathway from the White House to a nearby church for a photo op. Nonviolent protesters were teargassed and beaten as Trump strolled vaingloriously over to the church, grimaced while holding a Bible, and then hustled back to the safety of his bunker.

It's tempting to view what came next as a self-preservation impulse—the panic throes of a notoriously reactive and erratic president hearing the music. Surveying the landscape in July and noting that his polling numbers were still in free fall—despite his having issued a tepid executive order acknowledging that “some officers have misused their authority”—Trump followed through on his threats and dispatched federal agents to Portland several weeks after the city's most unruly demonstrations had mellowed out. His intention was ostensibly to defend a federal courthouse that had been vandalized by dissidents. Reports from the *Washington Post* suggest that his real goal was terror and bedlam: to create an environment of heightened tension and violence that he could attribute to Democratic misrule and then portray himself as having quelled. Agents in fatigues, bearing no identifying insignia or name badges, snatched a protester off the street and threw him into an unmarked van (by mistake, it turns out; they were actually looking for someone else). Other agents surrounded the courthouse and engaged in brutal nightly show-downs with demonstrators that caused the

It's not unreasonable to envision a dire next few months.

protests not only to grow but to spread to other cities as well. It seemed lost on Trump that his campaigning as a bulwark against urban chaos was undermined by the urban chaos unfolding on his watch and at his behest. Yet, far from being an inexplicable whim, this tactic was both a repetition and an escalation for Trump. He ran for president while evoking Nixonian calls for “law and order” and casting himself as a foil to the Black Lives Matter movement and its attendant protests. He signaled a specific desire to deploy federal forces to U.S. soil four days after his inauguration speech, in which he described America—then, as now, enjoying some of its lowest national crime rates in decades—as a gory hellscape. He later tweeted, “If Chicago doesn't fix the horrible ‘carnage’ going on, 228 shootings in 2017 with 42 killings (up 24% from 2016), I will send in the Feds!” It didn't take long for him to find other outlets for his ambitions.

In 2018, he was in circumstances similar to those he faces today, albeit without being on the ballot himself: With the mid-term elections looming, the united government he'd enjoyed since he took office was in peril and a prospective “blue wave” of Democratic victories threatened to wrest the House of Representatives from Republican control. At the same time, a migrant caravan was making its way on foot through the Northern Triangle of Central America with designs on seeking asylum in the U.S. Trump and his allies quickly cast the refugees as an invading army whose defeat was dependent upon Americans' voting the GOP back into power. Every few days brought a new escalation of this rhetoric. Trump and Vice-President Mike Pence suggested the caravan was populated by hundreds of drug traffickers and murderers; the president alluded to “unknown Middle Easterners” marching alongside them, a clear dog whistle meant to connote terrorism. The week before the election, Trump announced he was send-

ing 5,200 active-duty military troops to the border to form a blockade. “I am bringing out the military for this National Emergency,” he tweeted at the time. “They will be stopped!” The White House made no effort to substantiate his claims of rampant bloodlust and latent terrorism among the migrants, and troops at the border were left to languish in boredom while the caravan inched torpidly through Guatemala and Mexico—even after the election passed and Trump lost interest.

It was obvious then that the soldiers were props. By deploying troops, the president sought to give the impression that they were necessary, fueling the perception of a violent crisis against which he and his party were the only reliable protection. Less clear at the time was just how replicable this strategy would prove to be in subsequent elections. But Trump's enforcement actions this summer can only be read as a repeat campaign pageant, beholden more to his personal interests than any defensible measure of national security. Neither deployment was commensurate with the scale of the alleged emergency. The declining unrest in Portland has only intensified since Trump decided to “help.”

What comes next depends on Trump's ambitions and his desperation. He's already expanding his reach further. In remarks to the White House last month, Trump said he would dispatch federal agents to cities like Philadelphia, New York, and Oakland—“all run by liberal Democrats”—to crack down on recent spikes in crime. So far, he has deployed more to Portland (though the status of a reported withdrawal agreement with Governor Kate Brown that might reduce their presence remains unclear), as well as some to Seattle and Kansas City, Missouri, and is reportedly planning “surges” into Chicago and Albuquerque. Local leaders have almost uniformly protested these deployments. Trump has ignored them.

The president recently proposed to delay the election itself, again casting blue cities as ungovernable but for the White House's interventions. He found few takers for the idea, but even if he fails to do so, it's not unreasonable to envision a dire next few months—an election calendar marked by federal agents in fatigues not only roaming the streets and doing Trump's bidding but patrolling polling sites where he fears high turnout or disrupting voter efforts to reach them. The degree to which he is thwarted, or sets his sights elsewhere, would speak less to the resilience of America's democratic institutions than to their vulnerability. ■

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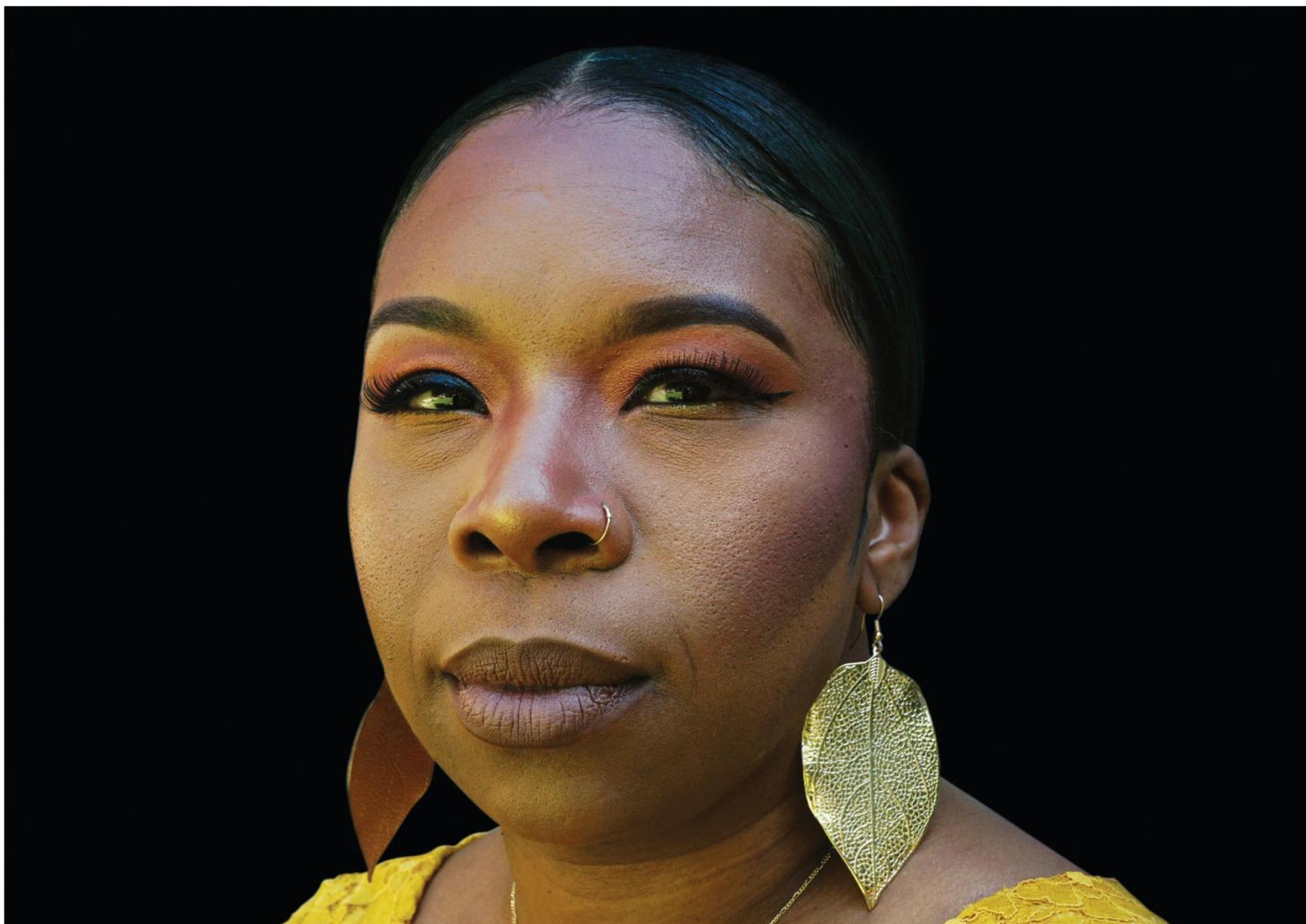
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47 MINUTES WITH ...

Lezley McSpadden

Six years, two district attorneys, and a national reckoning later, Michael Brown's mother is still seeking justice.

BY MOSI SECRET

FERGUSON POLICE OFFICER Darren Wilson shot and killed 18-year-old Michael Brown around this time of year, when the high summer sun in Missouri heats the pavement to temperatures that sear the skin. There are concerts, and at night the riverfront lights up with fireworks. Around this time, Lezley McSpadden's mind usually turns to the logistics of honoring her late son, whom she called "Mike Mike." Usually, she is planning an annual founda-

tion gala to benefit mothers who have lost children to violence or preparing a visit to Brown's grave site on the anniversary of his death, August 9.

But this summer brought with it a new climate, with protesters calling out the names of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery and, still, Mike Brown. Seeing officers indicted, a police department disbanded, and decades-old laws overturned in other states, McSpadden, 40, can't help but think that the moment has come for the

officer who killed her son to face a reckoning too. After some time out of the spotlight, and another infuriating interaction with the legal system, McSpadden has returned to her public fight.

“I respect time,” she told me in late July. “And I just knew that there was no way that this person would get away with this, you know, this cold killing of my son in broad daylight in front of so many people.” Sitting in a bright room in the house where she lives with her husband and three children in Florissant, one town over from the St. Louis suburb Ferguson, she paused. “Time showed us otherwise.” Behind her was a bureau topped with artwork featuring her son. His oval face appeared in miniature next to hers on my screen. She wore her hair up in braids, horn-rimmed glasses, hoop earrings, a thin gold chain with a cross, and a red T-shirt that showed her son’s eyes silhouetted in black against her chest. “It hadn’t reached that time for us as people.” She gathered her thoughts. “Equality was still not present.”

Her family’s story is now American history: On August 9, 2014, Brown and a friend were walking down a short, two-lane street. Wilson, a white police officer, ordered the young men to use the sidewalk. The interaction grew heated when they refused. Wilson, who later claimed that Brown approached his car and punched him in the face, pulled out his weapon and fired. He said Brown took on the look of a demon and fled. The officer later testified that Brown turned around and reached under his waistband as if to remove a weapon. Some witnesses claimed that Brown had his hands up. Wilson shot Brown, who was in fact unarmed, in the head. In the aftermath, cops investigating the shooting left Brown’s body on the hot asphalt for more than four hours as McSpadden and Brown’s father, Michael Brown Sr., moved through a furious and growing crowd of onlookers, unable to push past police to get close to their son. Television cameras and phones filmed as Brown’s body lay there under a sheet.

The next day, people took to the streets, many marching peacefully while others set cars and a gas station ablaze. Ferguson police responded with military-like force. Within days, Black Lives Matter, the hashtag that emerged after Trayvon Martin’s death, became a burgeoning movement. But a St. Louis County grand jury convened by Bob McCulloch—a law-and-order prosecutor in office for almost 30 years whose father was a police officer killed in the line of duty—declined to file charges against Wilson.

Months later, a federal investigation by Attorney General Eric Holder’s Justice

Department found that Ferguson had a “pattern of unconstitutional policing” and practices that “reflect and exacerbate existing racial bias,” but that Brown’s killing did not constitute a federal civil-rights violation. “Witness accounts suggesting that Brown was standing still with his hands raised in an unambiguous signal of surrender when Wilson shot Brown are inconsistent with the physical evidence, are otherwise not credible because of internal inconsistencies, or are not credible because of inconsistencies with other credible evidence,” the Justice Department reported.

“And so we fast-forward, six years later,” McSpadden said, bringing us back to the present, “and there’ve been numerous accounts of police brutality that have been recorded and played, and there’s still no justice; there was still no conviction. And then Ahmaud comes up, Breonna comes up, and George comes up, and we see a different movement in this moment of time. So maybe now is the time.”

The door to a new prosecution cracked open for McSpadden in 2018. Wesley Bell, a Black lawyer and city councilman, ran against McCulloch, campaigning on a progressive platform to end cash bail and provide alternatives to incarceration. He won, becoming the county’s first Black prosecutor. The victory is part of a tide of change since Brown’s death, in which many African-American and reformist prosecutors have won elections nationwide. And Ferguson, a majority-Black city that in 2014 had a white mayor and a six-person city council with one Black member, now has a Black mayor and a council that’s 50 percent Black.

McSpadden ran for city council last year, attempting to be part of that change from inside the government, but lost to another community activist. “Campaigning was scary,” she told me. “I had to knock on all those doors. I had to listen to people saying they weren’t going to vote for me. But it was important to me to go back for those who absolutely did support me, supported me when I couldn’t even support myself.”

“I just knew that there was no way that this person would get away with this cold killing of my son in broad daylight.”

When Bell took office, he fired the assistant prosecutor who presented evidence to the grand-jury investigation. But he demurred on questions about whether he would charge Wilson. His reticence has frustrated McSpadden. “So Wesley, as a St. Louisan and as a Black man who is supposed to be a representation of us here who elected him—it is his oath to do the right thing,” she said. “And I’m begging him to do that. And we know that he can do that. He needs no one else to give him approval. We gave him approval when we elected him.”

Then, on July 30, Bell met separately with McSpadden and Michael Brown Sr. to tell them what he would announce at a news conference later that afternoon: He had reviewed the investigation into Brown’s death and reached the same conclusion as McCulloch. “Although this case represents one of the most significant moments in St. Louis’s history, the question for this office was a simple one: Could we prove beyond a reasonable doubt that when Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown, he committed murder or manslaughter under Missouri law?” Bell said. “We cannot prove that he did.”

Bell added, “This case also exposes the limits of the law.”

McSpadden isn’t giving up. Together with her lawyers Benjamin Crump and Jerryl Christmas, she has launched a petition to gather support for indicting Wilson and organized a rally in front of Bell’s office in St. Louis County.

“For a moment, for a long moment, I was beating myself up for not being the best that I could be for my other children,” she said. Those other children seemed to be watching our conversation just outside the frame, and she gestured to them occasionally as she spoke. McSpadden has leaned on several mothers who also lost children to police killings. She’s spoken to Tamir Rice’s mother “maybe two or three times a day, every day. And our conversations were very emotional. One day, she told me, ‘You know, you have to talk to someone.’ And I decided to go and see a therapist, and I’ve been seeing her now for over two years, maybe close to three. And she has helped me with learning how to express a lot of my emotions.” She said she is moving through the stages of grief.

It has been a little while since McSpadden was in touch with the other mothers. “We try to reach out to one another close to the anniversary dates.” And she has kept her distance from the recent protests. “I know what that feels like, and I have to preserve myself for this part of my journey,” pressuring Bell to move forward with the case.

“I think now is the time, and that’s what we are seeing,” McSpadden said. “And I’m so grateful to be alive during this time.” ■

INTELLIGEN

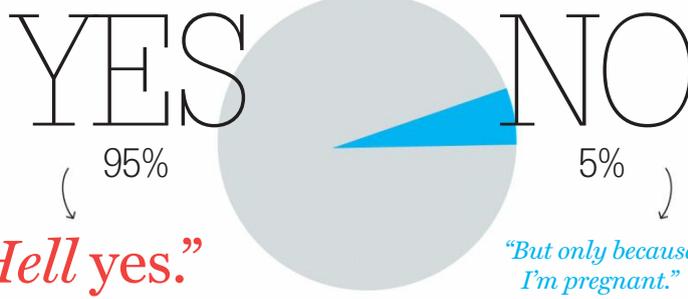


100-Person Poll: You Peed Where?

The summer of socially distanced outdoor drinking is here. On a recent Saturday, we asked 100 people at Brooklyn's McCarren Park about porta-potties, open-container laws, and 2020 etiquette.

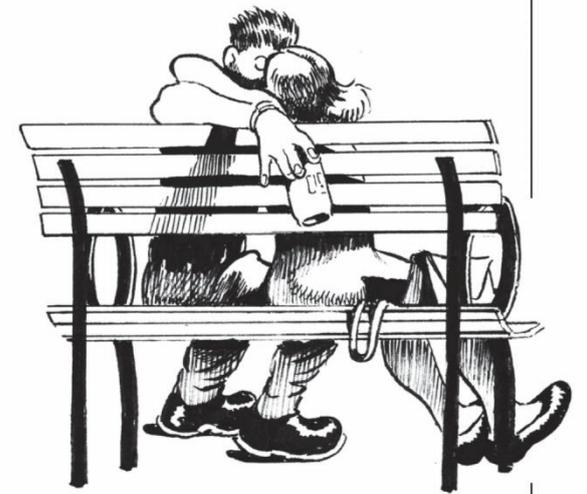
By Brock Colyar

Have you been drinking outside?



HAVE YOU MADE OUT WITH ANYONE NEW AFTER GOING OUT DRINKING?

YES22
NO78



HOW OFTEN?

Every day 1
Weekly 62
Sometimes 32
Once or twice before 5

ARE YOU DRINKING:

Less 44
More 26
Much more 8
Much less 15
About the same 7

ARE YOU GOING INTO OTHER PEOPLE'S APARTMENTS AFTER DRINKING?

YES 33
NO 67

HOW MANY FRIENDS ARE YOU USUALLY GOING OUT WITH?

Just one person 6
2-3 people 44
4-5 people 41
6-7 people 8
I don't care how many! 1

Where are your favorite places to drink right now?

Check all that apply:

At the park 70 
At home 43
On the street 16
At outdoor bars 17
At outdoor restaurants 12
Other? *"Everywhere"*

What are you comfortable doing these days? Check all that apply:



DRINKING IN PARKS	97	
STAYING HOME	96	
GETTING TO-GO DRINKS	92	
DRINKING WHILE ON THE STREET	69	
DRINKING AT OUTDOOR BARS	64	
EATING AT OUTDOOR RESTAURANTS	51	

"I'm generally uncomfortable eating at restaurants. Only have done it once, when it actually felt distanced."

Have you had outdoor sex during this time?

YES 3
NO 97

"This has been a dream of mine."

HAVE YOU TAKEN ANYONE HOME AFTER GOING OUT DRINKING?

YES: 13
NO: 87

"It's tough but we love our city."



I feel safe using:

Check all that apply:

Public Restrooms	74
Porta-potties	56
Hidden spots	54
Going in public	20
None of the above	11



Public restrooms at Bryant Park.

HAVE YOU PEED YOUR PANTS WHILE OUT DRINKING?

YES	1
NO	99

"Oh my God. A little. I was getting off the train to pee outside."

Have you peed outside?

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES	45
<input type="checkbox"/> NO	55

IF YES, DID YOU GET CAUGHT?

YES	1
NO	44



How are you feeling about spending time in the city right now?

I want to escape or move out of New York ...	9	I'm managing	25
I want to escape, but only for a quick vacation	35	The city's never been more fun	9

Have you used a public restroom?



YES	71
NO	29

"I'd much rather pee in the park than at Starbucks. Starbucks was gross before quarantine."

"The Bloomingdale's in Soho? That's a good bathroom."

"I've peed in a parking garage... twice."

HAVE ANY BARS, RESTAURANTS, OR STORES LET YOU COME IN TO USE THE RESTROOM?

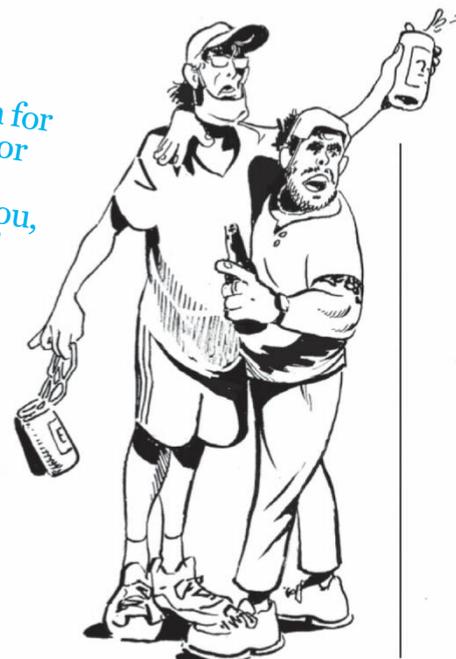
YES	45
NO	55



If we ever go back to normal, I hope the city keeps:

Lax open-container laws	40
To-go cocktail bars	23
European-style outdoor seating	20
Open streets that ban car traffic	6

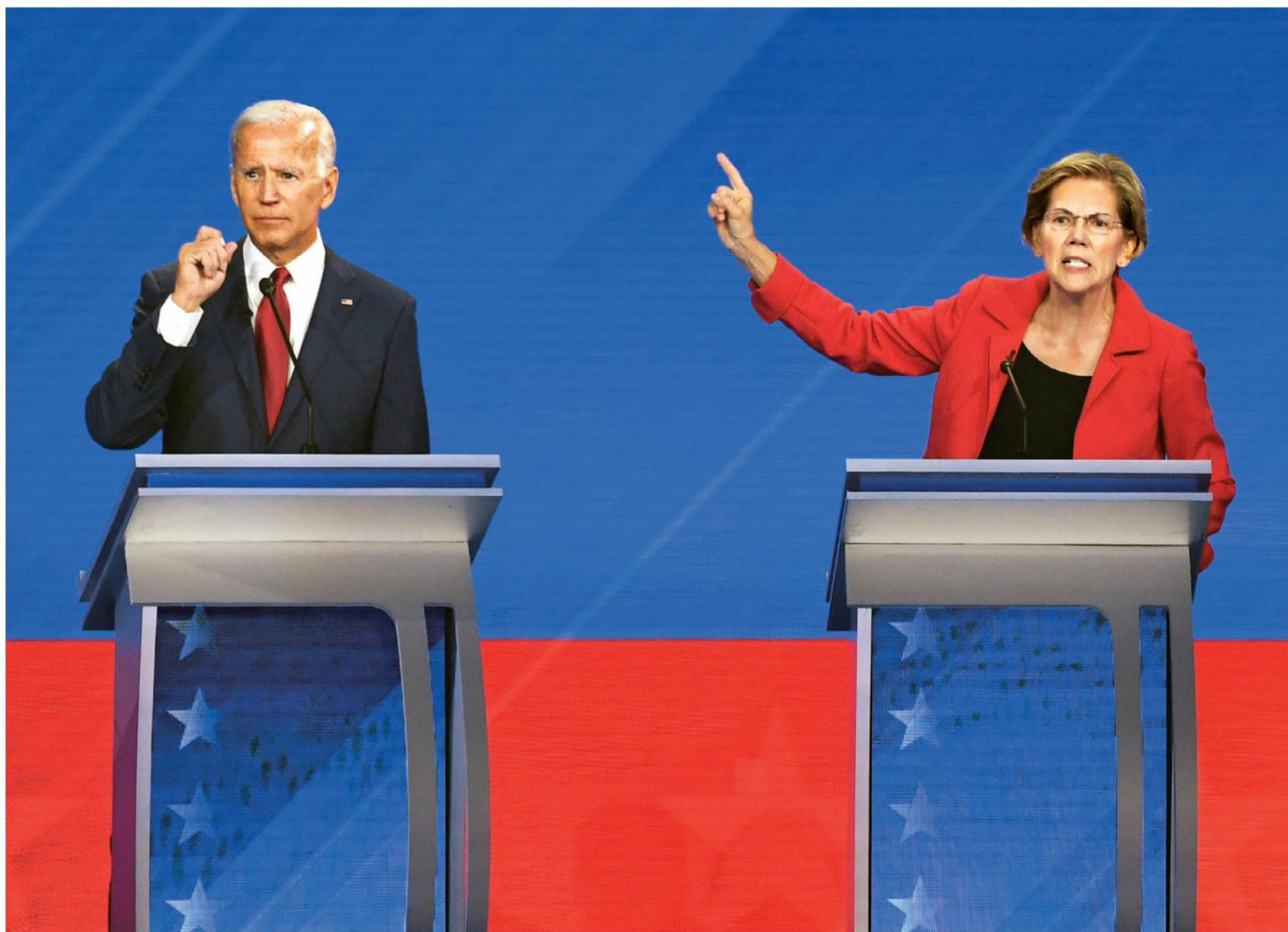
"Less prosecution for safe outdoor drinking. Looking at you, Billy de B."



WHICH PUBLIC RESTROOM DO YOU USE MOST OFTEN?

-  McCarren Park
-  Starbucks
-  The Strand
-  Wegman's
-  Washington Square Park

OTHERS: Soho Crate & Barrel, the woods in Prospect Park, Whole Foods on North 4th Street, the track at Astoria Park, Central Park, NYU Langone.



Joe Biden and Elizabeth Warren at the third Democratic-primary debate in Houston this past September.

Vision 2020: Gabriel Debenedetti

Elizabeth Warren Is Still Campaigning
There's only one person she's trying to win over, and he's listening.

JOE BIDEN AND ELIZABETH WARREN didn't know each other extremely well until March. They'd been crossing paths for well over a decade, most uncomfortably in 2005 at a Capitol Hill hearing, where they collided over bankruptcy law and the Delaware senator called the Harvard Law professor's argument "very compelling and mildly demagogic," and most closely ten years later at Biden's official residence in D.C. There, the VP secretly told Senator Warren he would want her as his running mate if he ran for president in 2016. For all their mutual respect, when they finally shared a debate stage in September 2019, it wasn't exactly chummy.

So when Warren and Biden spoke on the phone shortly before she dropped out of the presidential race early this year, there was every reason to believe it was a pro forma one-off—even after he embraced her bankruptcy policy in March, a move then widely seen as a gambit to win her endorsement and the support of Ber-

nie Sanders voters. But as winter became spring and the primary wound down, Biden started considering the general election against Donald Trump. And the calls—iPhone to iPhone, sometimes without aides on the line—kept coming.

Plenty of Democrats close to Biden were surprised at first. Traditionally, an old-school party-Establishment nominee would be expected to first reach out to the political center, not a liberal favorite known for her vision of progressive populist change.

By April, though, Biden had begun wrestling with how to respond to the pandemic while shifting his proposals in scale to correspond with the disaster's magnitude and to the left as he courted former Sanders and Warren voters. He moved toward Warren on student-loan-debt cancellation and expanding Social Security benefits, and the duo began talking a few times a month to work through ways to ensure Americans got economic relief. "Certainly, at this point, the immediate needs of the country are greater than they seemed a year ago and the extent of the crisis is sharp. All of that has changed, and his thinking is changing along with it," says Richard Cordray, a close Warren ally who directed the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau after she created it and who has been advising Biden, too. In May, Biden and Warren found they were both somewhat obsessed with watchdogging the Trump administration's recovery spending, and they co-authored an op-ed demanding more effective oversight. "They have a pretty close working relationship," says Cordray. "Both health-care and consumer-protection issues—economic vulnerability—are very much up her alley."

By late spring, Biden and Warren's catch-ups were still being organized primarily as policy discussions, but they sometimes veered into personal territory, as when Biden rang after Warren's elder brother died of COVID-19 in Oklahoma. And as the summer matured, some of Warren's top former campaign aides officially joined Team Biden, helping the former vice-president build up his digital operation and slotting into leadership roles in a couple of battleground states. In mid-June, Warren headlined a fund-raiser for Biden that brought in \$6 million, making it his campaign's single most lucrative event to that point. "We're so lucky to have you on the front line," Biden told Warren, whose golden retriever, Bailey, could be seen behind her on the private Zoom stream.

Warren is hardly Biden's sole policy-whisperer. Cordray points out that Biden's signature style is to gather a wide array of advice from across the party before com-

"We're so lucky to have you on the front line," Biden told Warren this summer.

mitting to a path, and the nominee hired plenty of staffers from other campaigns, too, including Kamala Harris's, Pete Buttigieg's, and Beto O'Rourke's. And within Biden's inner circle, Warren has no shortage of skeptics who remain unconvinced by her progressive politics.

Now Democrats close to Warren and Biden acknowledge there's still a chance he might pick her to be his running mate, but they doubt she'd get the nod for any other Cabinet role despite being floated for Treasury secretary and attorney general. What does seem to have emerged is an understanding between two skilled politicians: one an expert at reading the country's mood, the other an expert at exerting leverage.

It's true that history is littered with senators who returned to Washington after failed presidential campaigns only to fall short of their promises to influence the incoming administration from the outside; one former senior Obama official recently rolled his eyes when I brought up the idea that any senator, even a popular former candidate, could have a sustained influence on a new administration. But, he allowed, it's easy to see how Warren's position could be different: She is an economic-policy-oriented 71-year-old unlikely to run for president again, and she is eager to use the levers of power she saw up close during the Obama years.

Plenty of Democratic senators are now working out what their roles would be parallel to a Biden administration. Some are straightforward: Chuck Schumer, for example, would presumably continue to lead the Democratic Party in the chamber, helping make sure senators are in line with the White House on important votes. Warren, who is now far more famous than many of her colleagues, could clearly serve as a powerful voice of support for White

House policy on economic-recovery or public-health measures. But she could also use her platform to call public attention to administration moves she disagrees with, applying political pressure that the Biden team—already wary of the party's left flank—would be eager to avoid, especially on issues like health-care reform. Biden well knows how willing Warren was to work with the last Democratic White House on her policy priorities—in his 2014 memoir, even Tim Geithner praised his "productive working relationship" with Warren—and sometimes confront it. It took her less than two months in the Senate to go viral for ripping into Obama's bank regulators for not considering jailing financial executives. "I'm really concerned that 'too big to fail' has become 'too big for trial,'" she said in February 2013.

Now much of Warren's recent work with Biden has been on proposals for the matter likely to take up plenty of his first term in office: recovery from the coronavirus. As Biden has laid out his plans, Warren has outlined her own priorities, including massive new funding for local governments as well as passing an "Essential Workers Bill of Rights."

Close Warren watchers expect her to try to exert another kind of influence on an incoming Biden presidency in the meantime.

Warren has long been known in Washington for saying that "personnel is policy": As early as January 2015, a top Warren aide met with a Hillary Clinton adviser to warn about the role of finance-industry-friendly allies in the candidate's campaign and prospective administration. The message was clear, especially since Warren had just helped tank Obama's nomination of a Wall Street banker to be third-in-command at the Treasury Department. And by late 2016, she and some allies had drawn up a loose list of such people she would oppose if Clinton were to tap them for her administration, remembering—painfully—how the advisory board for Obama's presidential transition had included a sitting Citigroup exec.

So far, it looks like Biden is listening.

In late June, the ex-VP announced he had started building his own transition team, naming half a dozen senior hires to work with one of his closest confidants to begin shaping his administration. Two were joining from the House of Representatives, where they had been top aides to powerful elected officials. Three were former Biden staffers or alums of Obama's government. And the sixth was coming onboard directly from the Senate: She was Warren's top economic-policy adviser. ■

**TWO
LAWYERS,
A SUMMER
OF UNREST,
AND A
BOTTLE OF
BUD LIGHT.**

**THE
MAKING
OF A
MOLOTOV
COCKTAIL**

By Lisa Miller





↑ Urooj Rahman holds a Molotov cocktail in the passenger seat of a van in the early-morning hours of Saturday, May 30.



IT'S AN AUDACIOUS CHOICE to pause in front of an Applebee's restaurant on Flatbush Avenue and grant an impromptu interview to a video journalist shortly before you allegedly throw a Molotov cocktail into a police car. But the city was out of its collective mind that night, the Friday after the Monday George Floyd was killed. Urooj Rahman faced the camera looking high-strung and distracted, answering questions as her hands waved and flitted around her body and in front of her face as if they were birds escaping from a box. Rahman emigrated from Pakistan when she was 4 and now lives with her elderly mother in Bay Ridge; she works as an attorney at Legal Services in the Bronx, representing tenants without means in eviction proceedings. "This shit won't ever stop unless we fucking take it all down," she said. "We're all in so much pain from how fucked up this country is toward Black lives. This has got to stop, and the only way they hear us is through violence, through the means that they use. 'You got to use the master's tools.' That's what my friend always says."

Sometime later, around 1 a.m., Rahman apparently threw a Bud Light bottle, filled with gasoline and lit with a toilet-paper fuse, through the broken window of a parked, abandoned cop car that had already been vandalized. According to the government's complaint, there were witnesses. And because nothing happens anymore without documentation, the government says that police surveillance cameras recorded the act, and a photographer captured Rahman an instant before, leaning out of her friend Colinford Mattis's tan Town & Country van, holding the bottle stuffed with tissue but still unlit. In the dim background of the photograph, Mattis is driving, his head and gaze tilted away. The government says that after the bomb ignited, destroying the console of the NYPD vehicle, the two drove off. The police gave chase and, when they caught up with them, found a lighter and another Molotov cocktail in the passenger seat and the materials for making more in the back.

A short, edited clip of Rahman's video interview circulated with the first news stories, stoking widespread curiosity, incredulity, empathy, and pain: a lawyer who had come of age in an increasingly activist mainstream left speaking the language of abolitionist Twitter and looking to some on the right like a new breed of homespun terrorist. Mattis was the bigger mystery; the son of immigrants from the Caribbean, raised by a mother who was a home health aide and a foster parent, he never seemed the revolutionary type. He was a corporate lawyer who—after being plucked out of East New York by the scholarship program Prep for Prep—played football at boarding school, joined two eating clubs and a jockish fraternity at Princeton, and, after NYU Law, worked at Holland & Knight and Pryor Cashman, firms where first-year associates earn upwards of \$150,000 a year. All his

friends say Mattis seemed to wear the world lightly. He was a social guy, a positive force, always available to give friends a ride, always reading a book on the bus, a fashion agnostic who carried the same gray backpack he used in middle school.

Rahman threw the bomb; Mattis just drove. Or at least that's how the story came together on social media and in the press. But the unedited version of Rahman's interview complicates that account. Mattis was with Rahman on Flatbush Avenue that night. If you look carefully over her right shoulder, you can see the tan van parked at the curb. The interviewer asks Rahman a question: "We've seen police cars on fire and objects thrown at police, fireworks and that kind of stuff. How do you feel about that?" When Mattis enters the frame, apparently from the direction of the 7-Eleven next door to Applebee's, he is wearing the clothing you see in his mug shot: brown hoodie, black tank, and loose gym shorts. And he is carrying two bags: a large, heavy, squarish one in his left hand and a small, light, cylindrical-looking one in his right. He is masked, and he walks past Rahman without acknowledging her, so casual as to be almost invisible, to the van where he clicks open the back door and puts the packages in. (Mattis's lawyer declined to comment on the video. An early news report in the *New York Times* said some of the materials for the Molotov cocktail were purchased at a convenience store near where Rahman stood.)

Rahman answers the interviewer. "It's understandable," she says, not looking at Mattis, wrapping and rewrapping her scarf around her face. "This is the way that people show their anger and frustration," she says a minute later. "Because nothing else works. Nothing else." She remains unfailingly polite. At the conclusion of the interview, the video journalist asks her name and she tells him. And then she spells it. U-R-O-O-J.

MORE THAN 200 people were arrested in New York City on the night of May 29–30, including Rahman, who is 31, and Mattis, who is 32. Most of the demonstrators were released the next day, but Rahman and Mattis were held for hours at the 88th Precinct in Clinton Hill, interrogated, taken into federal custody, and finally charged with seven federal crimes—including arson, conspiracy, and the commission of a “crime of violence” using a “destructive device,” a charge that carries, if they are convicted, a mandatory minimum sentence of 30 years. Altogether, Rahman and Mattis each face nonnegotiable sentences of 45 years to life.

To be a lawyer is to agree to play by the rules, or at least to acknowledge that the rules exist, even as you seek to bend them. And it is this simplistic, romantic understanding of a lawyer’s job that is part of what has the government so provoked, as if going to law school is or should be a safeguard against breaking the law. “The conduct,” said U.S. District Court judge Margo Brodie in reference to this case, was “completely lawless.” At a recent bail hearing, one of the prosecutors argued similarly. “These were lawyers,” he said, “who had every reason to know what they were doing was wrong and knew the consequences. Committing this crime required a fundamental change in mind-set for them.”

But to work within that system is to understand just how capricious and brutal criminal justice can be—the enormous latitude given to prosecutors, the deference extended to judges and juries, and the procedural protocols and professional ethics that often merely cover for the status quo. And when a president and his advisers seem to regard the law as an obstacle course; when an attorney general metes out favors, not justice; and when immigrant children are held in cages and men are killed on video by police, some lawyers may want to embrace a more flexible definition of “lawless.” As recently as a few years ago, even a progressive-minded lawyer might have regarded fervent, visible participation in a political protest as professionally unbecoming. Today, some of Mattis and Rahman’s friends may concede in private that throwing a Molotov cocktail represents a lapse in judgment, but none are willing to discuss the degree to which their friends may have been ethically, professionally, morally, or legally out of bounds. Instead, they emphasize that violence against government property, especially in the midst of political upheaval, is not the same as violence against a person; that the prosecution of their friends for an act of what amounted to political vandalism is far more extreme than the crime itself; that it amounts to a criminalization of dissent and reflects a broader right-wing crusade against people of color and the progressive left—and, as such, demonstrates precisely the horror of the system they were out in



↑ Rahman with her parents at her Fordham University graduation ceremony in 2011.
→ Mattis holding an award he received from Her Justice while working with Holland & Knight in 2019.

the streets that night to protest. There is a version of the Rahman and Mattis story in which they are civil-rights heroes, even martyrs, instead of professionals who crossed a line.

These are people the least deserving of this kind of treatment, their friends say, people who are unfailingly kind, gentle, and decent. Rahman gave a piece of her apartment floor in Athens, Greece, where she was working during the migrant crisis, to a queer Syrian refugee in an abusive relationship; Mattis turned around on his way to vacation to sit by a friend’s hospital bed after she’d suffered a stillbirth. After college, Mattis worked for Teach for America in New Orleans and later won a prize for his pro bono work helping a single mother get child support. Rahman worked in Northern Ireland and on behalf of hill-tribe people in Thailand and was a student of South African apartheid. Over the past year, she started attending Friday-night meetings of an informal Sufi

“The only way they

spiritual group and had recently given a short talk to a Muslim women’s group about the sacredness of every single life, including those of animals—which is why she tried to be a vegetarian although sometimes fell short. She joked that she was a “slackat-erian” or “vegetrying.”

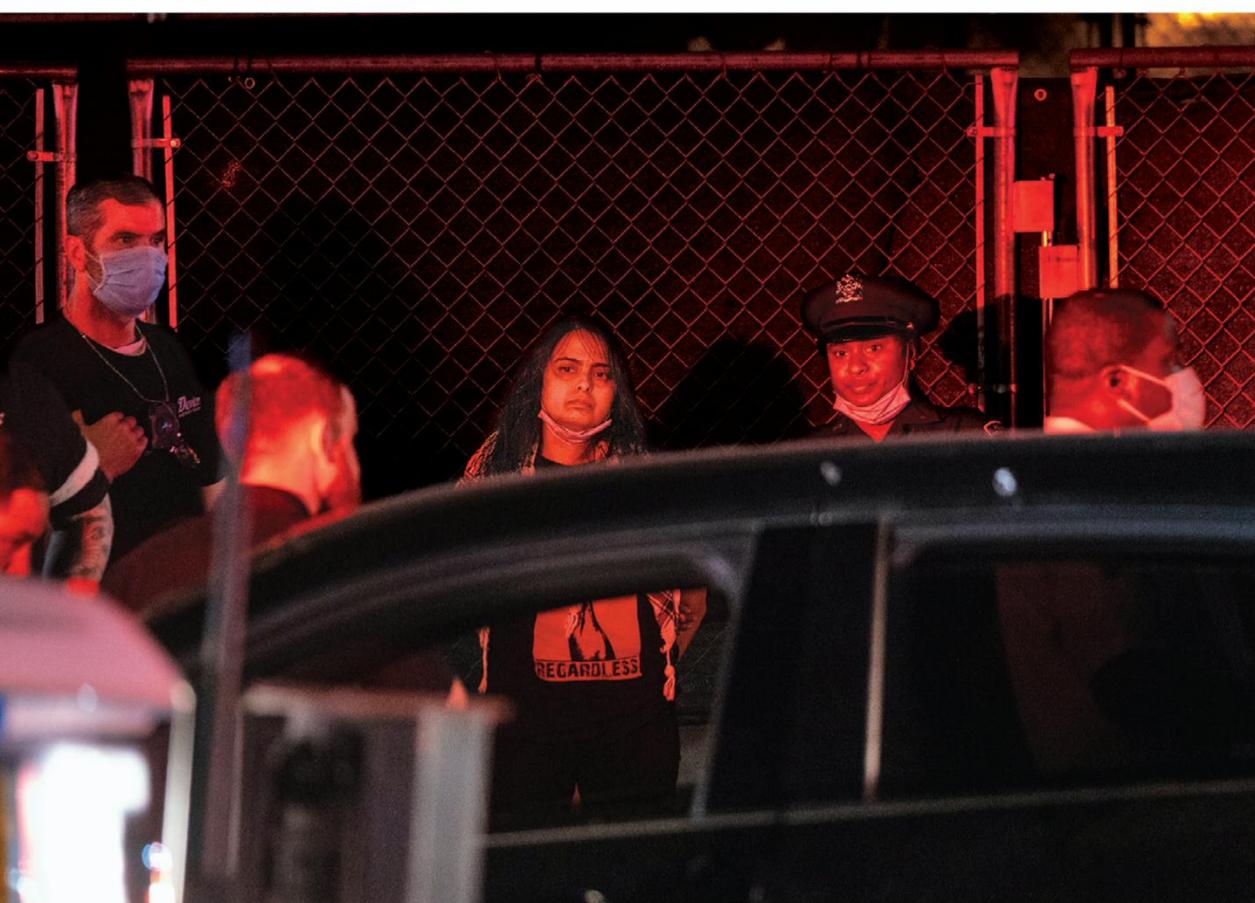
“My heart—and I speak for many of our friends—my heart has been breaking,” says Tabatha Robinson, who met Mattis through Prep for Prep and has just graduated from Harvard Law. When Robinson was a teenager, Mattis would travel from Princeton to her New Jersey high school to watch her ballet recitals because she’d confessed to him her dream of becoming a ballerina. “What

college boy shows up at their friend’s high-school ballet recitals?” She starts to cry. “Forty-five years to life? Are you kidding me? I want a world in which our sentencing doesn’t look like this.”

Mattis and Rahman are not, nor have they ever been, a couple, their friends say. The press is painting the night of May 29 as this “weird *Bonnie and Clyde* situation,” says someone close to Rahman. “It’s so freaking ridiculous. Colin is like a cute, lovable baby.” What Mattis and Rahman do share are life circumstances that set them apart from their friends, most of whom were raised with more privilege. Each of them lost parents comparatively young. Rahman’s father died suddenly when she was 23; Mattis’s died in

a stabbing on St. Vincent when he was in law school, and his mother, a powerful presence in his life—and a fervent Christian—died last summer. So they both know early grief and loss, and as the responsible, high-achieving adult children of immigrant parents, they stepped in to shoulder more than their share of the family obligations, while their peers were far more carefree. Rahman looked after her mother, doing the shopping and ferrying her to doctor’s appointments. Mattis took over the raising of his mother’s three foster children after her death. Their relationship is more “like brother and sister,” says Salmah Rizvi, who co-hosted the birthday party where they met. “Like, they take care of each other.”

IT WAS THE FALL of 2014 when Rahman and Mattis became friends, in the wake of Michael Brown and Eric Garner’s deaths, the year after the birth of Black Lives Matter. Rizvi had gotten close to Rahman that summer when they traveled together on a law-student fellowship to Israel and Palestine. Most law students start looking for jobs between their second and third years, and an alignment with Palestinian human rights could have been regarded by some as a career-risking move. Upon arriving in Israel, Rahman was stopped and questioned at Ben-Gurion International Airport for more than four hours; already, she was steeped in the language of social justice and racial politics, friends say. All summer long, as race-related anti-police uprisings spread across the U.S. and the Israeli military bombed homes in Gaza, the parallels between the American Black struggle and Palestinian oppression were a topic of conver-



←
Rahman and Mattis on the night of their arrests.

hear us is through violence.”

sation among the fellows (excitedly sharing rumors, for instance, that tear-gas canisters used in Ferguson are the same as those used on the Palestinians in the West Bank), and they used the word *apartheid* to describe the conditions they saw there and at home. Rahman was “very vocal,” one person says; at home, she was already studying discrimination by the NYPD in Arab and South Asian communities. She marched in Haifa in July with Palestinians against Israeli forces, and, upon returning home, wrote an essay decrying Israeli-military violence. “IDF soldiers provoke violence using tear gas, stun grenades, rubber-coated steel bullets, and often, live ammunition at civilians exercising their free speech,” she wrote.

For many of the young law students, the trip was galvanizing. “We were about to graduate, to become American lawyers, and the question was: How were we going to pursue this, involve the struggle in our work?” says Jordan Manalastas, who was in the program and is now a public defender for detained immigrants.

Mattis was also marching that fall. His roommate at St. Andrew’s boarding school, still a close friend, was Ikenna Iheoma, who was working at NBC Sports in 2014. Iheoma remembers, especially after Garner’s killing, feeling the responsibility as a Black man to stand up for other Black men and seeing that somehow popular opinion in the U.S. was still not united behind the victims of police violence. “It was fifty-fifty,” he says. One night, Mattis gathered a bunch of law students to march, and Iheoma came downtown. “I obviously joined in. It was a time when there were protests everywhere. The NYU law students went outside and held up signs and started marching, and as we were walking along and demonstrating, more and more people joined.” Most of the protesters were Black or people of color—as if the rest of the world weren’t ready or able to digest what it meant to watch a human die on video at the hands of police. “We were like, *Okay, this is really bad,*” he says. “We were 25, 26, at the time.” The late Obama years were studded with protests like these: A younger, more dissatisfied generation was rising up.

Iheoma was speaking to Mattis on the phone the Thursday before his arrest. Iheoma lives in Harlem, and they were talking about getting their dogs together in some park midway between them. (Mattis has a goldendoodle named Lorde Hampton.) They were marveling, as they had been for days, about how different it was now with so many people out in the streets—so many white people. The demands for police reform and accountability were no longer fifty-fifty but a scream in unison, and the friends were wondering, in this altered reality, about their role. They were full adults now: a corporate lawyer and a health-tech entrepreneur. Mattis had not told Iheoma that, because of the pandemic, he had recently been furloughed. “Should we be on the front lines? Should we be using money to donate more? Are there other things we can do this time that we weren’t able to do last time? Should we take a step back and let the younger people of color take the forefront, like we did six years ago?”



↑ Their mug shots.

THERE’S A CERTAIN KIND of Muslim kid who grew up in New York after 9/11 extremely aware of how it feels to have the world suddenly suspect you as the enemy. Richard Lubell watched a lot of these kids pass through his classroom at Brooklyn Tech. In 2006, when Rahman was a junior, she took his civics-and-law class, he said in an interview. He observed that—whereas previous generations might have stuck more closely to the straight and narrow, believing that if they worked hard, the world would reward them—Rahman’s cohort of kids was more “free-form, adventurous, bohemian, some version of that,” he said. “Somehow, the rules about success were tarnished, and they had to go out there and make their own rules, make meaning themselves. The world had become a more insecure place, more foreboding, and these kids were searching for a way to find meaning, whether you became a filmmaker or a world traveler or an activist lawyer. I may even have said that in class—that it was good to become an activist lawyer.” Rahman told Rizvi that it was Lubell who had inspired her to become an attorney.

Lubell himself, who retired from teaching three years ago, is a leftist, a self-proclaimed “third-party activist—maybe less identified with the Democratic Party per se,” and in his civics-and-law class, he held mock elections “that were parliamentary. It wasn’t a winner-take-all kind of thing. We practiced ranked voting, a way of distributing power,” he remembered. Class discussions were based on the law around actual news events, which, in the years after 9/11, included due process, equal protection, and search and seizure. Many teenagers in the school at the time were regularly stopped by police when entering the subway and told to hand over their backpacks for inspection. Lubell said that, in class, Rahman was “always a tough girl, kind of feisty and tough, and always fighting for the underdog.”

“She calls herself a cat,” says one of her friends. “She takes on this cat persona; she says she can talk to cats, like a cat whisperer. She’ll say, ‘I’m just going to be a cat and sit here.’” All the friends mention, unprompted, her stringent environmentalism, how she would chide them for buying plastic bottles of water at the deli or for using disposable grocery bags. One recalled a time (Continued on page 73)

What Will the School Look Like?

Terrified teachers. Obstinate officials.
Exhausted parents.
Inside the messy, bungled battle
to reopen the city's schools.

BY **Keith Gessen**



First Day of



In late June, while public-school students across the city were attending their graduation or “step-up” ceremonies over Zoom,

the NYC Department of Education, as part of its planning for school reopening in the fall, asked every principal in the system to measure their buildings. Armed with floor plans and laser pointers, the principals visited each classroom, noted which ones had windows, and figured out if any other spaces could be converted into classrooms. Then, after dividing the total space by the number of students, they were expected to come up with a reopening plan that would meet social-distancing guidelines—all in less than a month.

To Medi Ford, a high-school teacher in Brooklyn, this seemed crazy. Her principal was smart, creative, and a former science teacher, but she was not a public-health specialist or an epidemiologist. Ford had been in the public-school system long enough to know that there were many principals who would not be up to the challenge. “The DOE just said, ‘Good luck to your school. I hope you figure it out,’” Ford told me. “To me, that’s a recipe for chaos.”

Ford’s school is located on the top floors of a former torpedo factory near the Dumbo waterfront. After her principal completed the mandated walk-through, Ford visited the school with her own tape measure. She had been in the building only once since March, when the city’s schools had shut down in a whirl of panic and confusion, and she found the experience eerie. She was required to get permission to enter two days in advance and to sign in at the door with a school-safety officer.

Inside, the school was dark and empty. Ford walked through the halls and found that they were less than eight feet wide. The hallways had always belonged to the students: It was where they could escape the confines of the classroom. She took a video of the sink in the hallway that had been out of commission ever since lead was discovered in the water. Fearing cockroaches, she decided to skip the bathrooms and the gym. Entering her classroom, she found it almost exactly as she had left it months ago, a pre-pandemic time capsule. Now, in the era of social distancing, she realized it was far too small for her 20 students. Measuring the tables at which her kids once sat, working in groups, Ford found that they were less than six feet long, meaning they could now accommodate only one student at a time.

“It was sad,” she says. It was sad to see her classroom, set up for lively group discussions, rendered unusable. It was sad to imagine her students having to cling to the edges of the hallway as they pass one another. But Ford was also angry. A lot of time had passed since March, and almost nothing had been done to prepare the school to reopen. It seemed unthinkable that it could now be done in time.

AS SCHOOLS STRUGGLE to reopen under conditions of a still-festering pandemic, New York City faces a cruel paradox. Because the virus came here early and did unspeakable damage, and because the city endured a three-month lockdown, New York is now, from a coronavirus perspective, one of the safest urban school districts in the United States. It is therefore theoretically one of the easiest to

reopen. But for the very same reasons, it is the hardest school district to reopen. Its employees have seen what the virus can do to entire communities. Its finances have been decimated. Many teachers, like the families of their students, have fled the city for safer ground.

Worst of all, the people charged with preparing the most ambitious school reopening in the country are angry at one another, working at cross-purposes, and full of distrust. Teachers feel they are being asked to jeopardize their very lives to provide an inferior educational experience so that other adults can go off to work. School administrators and staff feel they are being asked to plan the impossible with too little time and too little money. Working parents, especially mothers, find themselves shunted back into the home, sitting alongside their children for hours as they Zoom in to their classes. And looming over all the confusion and divisiveness is a touchy, querulous, voluble mayor who cannot seem to make up his mind. Nearly everything has conspired to prevent the city’s schools from reopening at anything close to their full capacity, if they reopen at all.

Teaching is not like any other profession. You aren’t sitting at an isolated computer, or driving a vehicle, or hammering nails on a construction site, surrounded by adults who can reasonably be expected to wear masks and observe social distancing. You’re in an enclosed space all day, surrounded by kids. You teach them to tie their shoes, open a bag of potato chips; you teach them how to read, how to tell time, what an isosceles triangle is, what caused the Civil War. No one besides their parents can make more of a difference in their lives. Teachers are underpaid, overworked, often overlooked—and, universally, profoundly trusted and beloved.

According to Michael Mulgrew, a former high-school English teacher from Staten Island and now head of the powerful United Federation of Teachers, the union started planning for the fall in the first weeks of April. Mulgrew says the planning committee looked at all sorts of options: “Any plan you can think of, we discussed.” The committee’s members looked at outdoor learning but concluded that, by the end of October, the weather would be too cold and wet. They explored keeping high-school students at home and letting elementary students spread out into the high schools but could not solve the staffing problem. “A teacher is not just a teacher,” Mulgrew says. “An elementary-school teacher is a specialist in child development. A high-school teacher is a specialist in communicating complex concepts. You can’t just put a high-school teacher in a class full of kindergartners.” In the end, they came back to alternating kids between classroom and remote learning to create enough space for social distancing. “Anyone who does the numbers would see: Either you triple the number of classrooms and teachers or you go hybrid,” Mulgrew says. “It’s just math. Once you start with the safety piece, it becomes a space and teacher-capacity issue.”

Many other school districts across the country were coming to the same conclusion. But in New York, there was a difference: The teachers and the mayor were not speaking to each other.



How Other Countries Are Trying to Make Schools Safe

NETHERLANDS
Students use a gangway to avoid crowded exits after elementary schools reopened in May.



THAILAND
The government mandated that all students wear face masks when schools reopened on July 1. For added protection, desks at a school in Sam Khok were outfitted with old ballot boxes repurposed as partitions.



SENEGAL
A Red Cross worker sprays a student with disinfectant at a school in Dakar on June 25, the first day students returned to examination classes.



BRAZIL
Maura Silva, a teacher in Rio de Janeiro, places a “hug kit” she created on her student Yasmin de Jesus Ramos before embracing her. Educators in the city are making home visits while they wait for public schools to reopen.

Mulgrew says the mutual animosity goes back to the winter. In January, a teacher returning from a trip to China was put in quarantine. The following month, after February break, teachers and students returning from field trips to Northern Italy discovered that tests for the virus were almost impossible to come by. “The mayor was out there saying everyone should get tested, but they couldn’t get tested,” Mulgrew says. Then, in early March, a high-school teacher at Grace Dodge in the Bronx tested positive for the coronavirus—but the DOE refused to close the school, because the teacher had faxed in his test results himself rather than having the hospital do it. “That’s when things got super-ugly,” Mulgrew says.

On March 12, at a meeting with parents and advocates, Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza was asked about a petition signed by 108,000 people asking the schools to shut down. Carranza replied, flipantly, that when he got a letter from 108,000 epidemiologists, then he would close the schools.

The next morning, Mulgrew had a contentious meeting with Mayor de Blasio. He urged the mayor to close the schools, but de Blasio resisted. “Then he did that press conference,” Mulgrew says. De Blasio brandished a letter from a big health-care-workers union arguing that schools needed to stay open so its members could take care of the sick. “Which is rich,” Mulgrew says, “because by Sunday, that same union was saying they didn’t support that position.”

That morning, Mulgrew announced that he would be taking the city to court to close the schools. By the afternoon, the governor and then the mayor announced the schools would be closing.

Since then, Mulgrew and the mayor have spoken only once, on a conference call of the city’s school-reopening commission.

I ask if that’s abnormal, for the mayor not to be talking with the head of the teachers union, especially at a time like this.

Mulgrew agrees. “It’s strange,” he says.

WHEN THE DOE finally issued its preliminary guidance on reopening, in early June, its “space-utilization analysis” suggested that a “full size” classroom of about 800 square feet could hold nine to 12 students. By the DOE’s estimate, that meant most schools would have to divide their student body

into two cohorts—one cohort would attend school in person on alternating days or weeks, while the other engaged in “remote learning” at home. The plan devoted an entire page to laying out various possible schedules for the cohorts without addressing more fundamental questions—how, for example, teachers could be expected to juggle both the in-class and remote-learning cohorts simultaneously.

Worse, from the parental perspective, limiting in-person classes to 12 students would mean that a fairly typical New York City classroom of 30 kids would have to be split into three cohorts, not two. The principal of P.S. 107, a popular school in Park Slope that appears in Mo Willems’s book *Knuffle Bunny Too*, sent a letter to parents after doing the DOE-mandated

walk-through of her building and measuring the classrooms. Absent some kind of intervention, she told parents, their kids would be attending the school in three cohorts this fall. That meant there would be weeks when students would have only one day of school. And what if that day fell on, say, Yom Kippur? For many parents, the city's plans—rolled out slowly and semi-publicly at a time when they were still stuck at home all day with their kids, wrestling with Zoom classes—were a real blow: The pandemic was not over, and it wouldn't be over come fall, and there was no telling when it would be over.

I should admit at this point that I was not a neutral observer of these events. My older son was just finishing up pre-K, over Zoom, and headed for kindergarten. When I read about the letter, I looked at my son's school, which was at full capacity, and shuddered at the prospect of a one-in-three school year. In mid-June, our son's pre-K teacher sent parents a DOE survey to gauge our preferences for school reopening. It asked us to rate, among other things, how important it was for us that the school be cleaned on a regular basis. The science on surface transmission of the virus was still evolving. Were they asking us for our understanding of the latest studies? The survey did not inspire confidence.

But there was also, finally, a clear outline of possible schedules. Parents were asked whether we would rather have our kids attend school every other day, every other week, or online only. I took that last option to be an ominous warning. With the other dads in the park, I gamed out the possibilities. It was possible that after all these months of lockdown, we were still not going to have any school in the fall.

There was another way to look at the online-only option. In July, I spoke with the mother of one of my son's pre-K classmates, an interior designer named Marian Akinloye Ennis. Her husband works in the lumber department at Home Depot. The couple lives in Bed-Stuy, and they have four girls, ages 10, 8, 5, and 1. Ennis says that, thankfully, orders at the design firm where she works have not slowed during the pandemic; the clientele is so wealthy that they have not been affected. But her own life has changed a great deal. She has stopped going into the office, locking herself in her bedroom for entire days when she needs to get work done, leaving her husband or a babysitter to watch the girls. She and her husband have put in hundreds of hours to transform their backyard, previously nothing more than a pile of dirt, into a garden with raised beds. They've done this for their daughters, whom they, out of an abundance of caution, had not let out of the house since the pandemic began.

Ennis is from Texas, and though she has been in New York for over a decade, she still talks with a slight drawl. She acknowledges how much it would help to be able to drop the kids off at school this

fall. "It would be nice to have them out of my hair and have the house to myself," she says. "I wouldn't have to lock myself in my room as much." She's worried about her daughters bringing the virus home, but she's more worried about others, and the effect it would have on her girls if they made someone sick. "You just hear these horror stories about what happens to the adults in the kids' lives," she says. "How horrible would it be for them to lose a teacher because we decided that this was the best thing to do?"

She told me she wants to know all the details: what the schools plan to do in response to various eventualities, how confident they are in their ability to keep everyone safe. Then she says something I had not heard from many parents.

"In a life-and-death situation," she says, "what do you do?"

A

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS and teachers and parents struggled to answer that question, the science was constantly changing. There was disagreement among scientists about how the virus was transmitted and the role children played in transmission. From the very start, in Wuhan, observers were surprised and relieved that children did not seem to be among the ones afflicted by COVID. But there was no clear explanation for why. In a study that received extensive coverage in the *New York Times*, the eminent German virologist Christian Drosten found that "viral load" does not vary by age. "Based on these results," he wrote, "we have to caution against an unlimited reopening of schools and kindergartens in the present situation. Children may be as infectious as adults."

In real-world settings, though, kids did not seem to be making other people sick. An early contact-tracing study from Singapore that looked at confirmed COVID cases in three schools found no evidence that children, especially small children, transmitted the virus at all. More recently, a large South Korean contact-tracing study found that kids under 10 transmitted the virus at a significantly lower rate than older kids and adults. But the rate was not zero. Some of these studies received attention in the news media; others did not. In a way, it didn't matter. In the absence of a definitive explanation for why children did not appear to transmit the virus, the science could not be said to be conclusive. And the parents and teachers I spoke with were not necessarily monitoring the latest studies. They were simply reading the news. A summer-school teacher had died in Arizona, they told me. There was a COVID outbreak in day-care centers in Texas. A little girl in Florida had died.

There was debate around the developmental effects of continued school closure on children, especially those from poorer families with less access to educational resources outside school. Some researchers compared the likely effects to the "summer slide," when kids spend a bunch of time playing with worms and forget what they learned at school. But as Megan Kuhfeld, a senior research scientist at the assessment nonprofit NWEA, explained to me, the analogy is misleading. The summer slide does not increase inequality, because both poor kids and rich kids play with worms. Whereas during the lockdown, wealthier Zip Codes produced many more Google searches for educational topics like Khan Academy than did poorer Zip Codes. A continued shutdown of schools, Kuhfeld believes, would most likely increase inequality, and the longer it lasts, the more it will do so. She says the COVID shutdown is more comparable to a political or natural cataclysm: the massive school closings in the South in the late 1950s as a protest against desegregation, the 1968 teacher strike over community control of New York City schools, Hurricane Katrina. In each case, there was significant short-term learning loss, usually accompanied by longer-term effects as well.

One of the most insistent and authoritative voices arguing for school reopening has been that of Dimitri Christakis, the head of

"We're talking about a period of a year, possibly two years, before it's completely safe for kids to go back to school."



NORTH KOREA

The government mandated masks for all students and added washing stations when schools reopened in June.



INDIA

While the nation's schools remain closed, students who lack electronic devices to attend online classes are gathering in small outdoor sessions.



JAPAN

A student makes a presentation behind a plastic sheet during an English class at an elementary school in Funabashi. Japan implemented some of the most stringent precautions of any country when its schools reopened in June.



ISRAEL

A student at an Ultra-Orthodox school reacts to a swab test. Some schools in Israel, which reopened on May 17, have been forced to shut down again over safety concerns.

the Center for Child Health, Behavior, and Development at Seattle Children's Research Institute and editor-in-chief of *JAMA Pediatrics*. In May, Christakis published an editorial urging policy-makers to start thinking about school reopening. Most people, he believes, don't realize how long it will take to develop a vaccine and how harmful it would be to keep schools closed until then. "The earliest prognosis for a vaccine is not until early 2021, and even then kids won't be, or shouldn't be, the first group to receive them," he says. "So we're talking about a period of a year, possibly two years, before it's completely safe for kids to go back to school. That is an unconscionable period of time to keep kids out of school."

Christakis is a leading expert on the baleful effects of screen time on young minds. Now, with children drowning in an unprecedented stream of screen time, he worries about increased depression and anxiety among kids of all ages. He points out that kids who fall behind in reading by third grade are less likely to finish high school. And he blasts federal health officials for what he calls impractical guidance.

"Think of what the CDC is," he says. "They're the center for *disease* control. I don't know who put together their guidelines, but my guess is they weren't child-development experts. They certainly weren't teachers." The entire debate, he says, is being dominated by infectious-disease experts. "If you ask them, 'Can schools play an important role in the transmission of the virus?,' the answer is, 'Yes, they could!' But they're not thinking about the risks of not opening schools. Our children have already paid a heavy price, and they're going to pay a heavier price if we keep them out."

Christakis acknowledges that a small number of kids have gotten sick from the virus, but he says this is rarer than being hit by lightning. He understands why teachers are afraid of going back into classrooms, but he insists that such fears are not rational. If they take the necessary precautions, he says, their risk will be very low, almost nonexistent. He compares teachers to health-care workers: When doctors and nurses have the proper equipment and follow the protocols, they do not get sick from COVID.

CHRISTAKIS AND I SPOKE on the morning of July 7. I found it comforting: Here was a person with data, a respected pediatrician and epidemiologist. And he was telling me that it was okay for my child to go back to school, that it was okay for all our children to go back to school. He conjured a vision of schools that could be as safe and clean as hospitals, where children play with one another and develop their natural capacities, overseen by kindly teachers in N95 masks.

Was it possible, I thought, that the burbling anxiety coming from teachers and parents was just a natural reaction to the idea of subjecting themselves and their children to any risk, however slight? The spread of COVID in public schools can never be reduced to zero. But what if it could be reduced to the same level as in the general population? What if going to school were no riskier than shopping for groceries? Shouldn't parents (Continued on page 74)

GOOD

**The world is consumed by violent fights and hostile disagreements.
SARAH SCHULMAN sees a way out of them.**

CONFLICT

BY MOLLY FISCHER

Sarah Schulman is a playwright, an author, and a queer activist. She is also a professor of creative writing, and once, a number of years ago, she learned that a male graduate student maintained a blog where he wrote about his crush on her. He wrote that he was in love with her; he wrote that he wanted to fuck her; he wrote about her appearance in a way that made her feel bad. She told her colleagues what was happening, and their response was unanimous: He was “stalking” her. They advised Schulman to report him to a supervisor.



She considered this. She was uncomfortable with what was happening, and she wanted it to stop. But she was also uncomfortable with her colleagues' advice. "I realized that the more I saw myself as being victimized by this person, the more support I had from my colleagues," Schulman told me. "They would wrap me in the comfort of their protection. And I found this very disturbing. Because no one said to me, 'Why don't you ask him what he thinks is going on?'"

In her mind, *stalking* meant something like "when your ex-husband is in front of your house with a gun." She wasn't frightened of her student; she was disconcerted. "Stalking is a real thing, and people lose their lives to stalking," Schulman said. What she had on her hands was not that: It was a situation in which "somebody is feeling something and another person feels uncomfortable about it. That is often called stalking, but it's not stalking." She decided to call her student and talk to him about it.

She learned, first of all, what a blog was and what sorts of things people wrote there—this was the early aughts, and she hadn't really known. So there was a generational divide at work. She also learned she was the first teacher who had taken his writing seriously; he'd probably gotten "over-involved" because of that. They had a few conversations, he said what he wanted to say, she transferred him to another adviser, and no further issues arose. Looking back, "the scary thing was how much reward was waiting for me if I presented myself as victimized," she said—that promise of community embrace.

Schulman describes this episode in a book she wrote some years later, *Conflict Is Not Abuse*. The book's central insight is that people experiencing the inevitable discomfort of human misunderstanding often overstate the harm that has been done to them—they describe themselves as victims rather than as participants in a shared situation. And overstating harm itself can cause harm, whether it leads to social shunning or physical violence.

Schulman argues that people rush to see themselves as victims for a variety of reasons: because they're accustomed to being unopposed, because they're accustomed to being oppressed, because it's a quick escape from discomfort—from criticism, disagreement, confusion, and conflict. But when we avoid those uncomfortable feelings, we avoid the possibility of change. Instead, Schulman wants friends to hold each other accountable, ask questions, and intervene

to help each other talk through disagreements—not treat "loyalty" as an excuse to bear grudges.

A wide-ranging exploration of human relationships and responsibility, *Conflict Is Not Abuse* was the rare book published in October 2016 to be more relevant instead of less by November's end. It was a book for which Schulman could find no U.S. publisher; which was released by Arsenal Pulp, a queer Canadian press that paid her a \$2,500 advance; and which—like *Debt*, by David Graeber, or *All About Love*, by bell hooks—was the kind of accessible work that wins a radical figure unexpected fans. The book offers readers a clarifying lens through which to consider the fraught encounters of our era of discontent: between police and protesters; between writers and their readers; between colleagues, neighbors, and friends. It is now in its seventh printing.

Clear, provocative and concise, "conflict is not abuse" is a perfectly aerodynamic unit of intellectual achievement. It has flown farther, faster, than Schulman ever thought it would. In part, this is because the mantle of victimhood she argues against has become more widely recognized and discussed even as it has remained exceedingly commonplace. Claudia Rankine, a friend of Schulman's for nearly 30 years, said the Central Park encounter between Amy Cooper and Christian Cooper was emblematic of the pattern Schulman describes. Christian Cooper was birding in May when he asked Amy Cooper to follow park rules and leash her dog; she responded by calling the police and claiming she was in danger. "It's a threat that is imagined but then weaponized in a society that is systemically racist," Rankine said.

Schulman's analysis scrambles familiar ideological lines. She looks askance at trigger warnings; she also looks askance at Zionism. She considers the way accusations of sexual threat have been used against Black and queer people and then uses that understanding to extend empathy to those accused of sexual harassment. She tries to dissect the internal logic of police brutality and domestic abuse. Her ideas' appeal lies in offering a new way to consider seemingly intractable problems and in drawing lines between our political ideals and the way we behave in daily life. ("There are a lot of progressive people who are very petty," Schulman told me. "So what kind of progressive world can they build?") They're complicated ideas, and the book takes them in directions sure to give every reader some-

thing to disagree with. But—at least within the realm of personal relationships—they also come down to an almost kindergartenish simple dictum: Talk, listen, work things out.

As she makes clear, this directive is simple but hardly easy. One of the reasons so many people claim victimhood is that, in Schulman's observation, having your pain taken seriously is a gift only victims seem to receive. "It's about being eligible for compassion," she told me. "But everybody deserves support, regardless of what position they're in."

SCHULMAN BEGAN WRITING *Conflict Is Not Abuse* in 2014, during a summer shadowed by the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, by the death of Eric Garner on Staten Island, and by the deaths of some 2,000 Palestinians in Gaza. These events seemed to her to share a form. Soon, she was talking with her students about Garner; she was having long arguments on Facebook about Israel; she was angry about what she saw as terrible injustices, but she was also interested in how they came to be. How did a violent cop or a member of the Israeli army ratio-

SPEECH

nalize what he or she had done? Listening to the explanations on offer suggested that anxiety and fear had given rise to a "mortal overreaction by an oppressive force," Schulman told me. The cops and Israeli soldiers had seen themselves as victims and lashed out.

The results, in those cases, were fatal. But Schulman began to recognize the same pattern playing out in her private life: a misplaced sense of danger, an overreaction, then a rift that came to seem impossible to repair. Two friends would have a fight, then one would persuade the rest of their clique to turn on the other. Someone would express a dissenting opinion, then face accusations of violence and calls for punishment. Schulman saw people turning away from the challenges of conflict and instead asking some larger body—a group of friends, a college bureau-

cracy, the state—to ratify their status as victims and intervene on their behalf.

“A nonfiction book is the story of an idea,” Schulman told me—and the analysis found in *Conflict Is Not Abuse*, she writes, brings “fifty-seven years of living and thirty-five years of writing to a critical conclusion.” In this case, the idea’s story is perhaps also her own.

Schulman’s family lived on 10th Street when she was born, in 1958; she lives on 9th Street now, and when we first met, in very early March, it was at a boutique hotel on 8th. She has a soft face, a deliberate cadence, and wry wit. Of her status as a fixture in the neighborhood, “the only thing older than me is Veselka,” she said. (The restaurant opened in 1954.)

Schulman has stayed close to where she was born but not because it was ever an easy place to be. Growing up Jewish and middle class in Manhattan, she came from what she has called a Holocaust family, with a history “typical of my Jewish generation: soaked in blood, trauma, and dislocation.” It was also a family in which, she has said, “being a smart female was an insurmountable problem and being gay was the ultimate disaster.”

current project—her third novel, which had a lesbian narrator. The other students assumed the narrator was a man. Paley asked Schulman to come to her office after class. “Look, you’re really a writer,” Schulman remembered Paley telling her. “You don’t need this class. Go home.” She dropped out. That third novel, *After Delores*, was a noirish detective story narrated by a lesbian waitress, and it garnered Schulman’s first book review in the *New York Times*. (“I read the book, found the lady sleuth to be a vomit-stained, coffee-stained, bloodstained lesbian with great self-doubt and a rather severe hygiene problem, and decided I liked it,” wrote the cowboy singer and writer Kinky Friedman in his enthusiastic review.)

In the ’80s, Schulman was finding success and also finding a community: a downtown world of queer artists and leftists throwing parties and forming ad hoc political groups and collaborating on projects—like the New York Lesbian & Gay Experimental Film Festival, which Schulman started in 1987 with filmmaker Jim Hubbard. “We were sitting in her apartment smoking a joint,” Hubbard recalled. “Sarah handed me the joint and said, ‘We should do a lesbian and gay experimental-film fes-

susceptible members are infected, the numbers of new victims will decline.”

That indifference galvanized a generation of activists. The same year Schulman and Hubbard founded their film festival, Larry Kramer spurred the founding of ACT UP. Schulman and Hubbard both joined. ACT UP members infiltrated the New York Stock Exchange, where they chained themselves to a balcony and disrupted the opening bell; they shut down FDA headquarters; they covered Jesse Helms’s house in a giant condom. The group’s combative spirit remains bracing. When Kramer died in May, the *Times* still seemed disturbed by the force of his rage. “He worked hard to shock the country into dealing with AIDS as a public health emergency,” read the subheading of his obituary. “But his often abusive approach could overshadow his achievements.” In this context, however, being “confrontational” (a word the *Times* later swapped in for “abusive”) was not a quirk of personality; it was the point. And between the federal government (or the *New York Times*) and Larry Kramer, which party was really in a position to “abuse” the other? Indeed, remarked one observer on Twitter, “calling Larry Kramer ‘abusive’ is

“THE IDEA OF FREE IS BEING CO-OPTED BY THE RIGHT.

The answer is more speech, not less.”

In *Conflict Is Not Abuse*, she describes going to her high-school guidance counselor for help: “I was sixteen in 1975 and faced the brutality of my parents’ homophobia,” she writes. In response, the counselor “told me not to tell my classmates that I was a lesbian because they could shun me.” After graduation, she left the city for the University of Chicago, but she soon returned to attend Hunter College, where she studied with Audre Lorde. By 1979, she was working as a reporter for the city’s underground queer press and waitressing at a coffee shop in Tribeca.

While waiting tables, she managed to write and publish two books, but some of the neighborhood artists who were her regulars suggested it might be useful to get an M.F.A. She enrolled in a City College writing program taught by Grace Paley, and on the first day, she read aloud an excerpt from her

tival.’ And I said, ‘I’ve always wanted to. When should we do it?’ And Sarah thought for a little bit and said, ‘September.’” The festival (now called MIX NYC) went on to host the first New York screening of *Paris Is Burning* and early work by Todd Haynes.

Even as that community was flourishing creatively, it faced the devastation of a plague. Schulman and her peers watched friends and lovers die terrible deaths from AIDS as powerful institutions mostly shrugged. The scale of mainstream indifference to the plight of AIDS victims makes comparison with, say, the current coronavirus pandemic difficult. This was not a disease that most Americans saw as a crisis that had anything to do with them. “Why Make AIDS Worse Than It Is?” read the headline of one *New York Times* editorial. “The disease is still very largely confined to specific risk groups. Once all

actually an ancient mystic ritual to summon Sarah Schulman.”

Schulman is devoted to preserving the memory of the ACT UP era and of the hard work that its accomplishments required. In June 2001, she and Hubbard began the ACT UP Oral History Project, for which they recorded interviews with more than 180 surviving members of the group. Hubbard and filmmaker James Wentzy filmed, and she asked questions. “She would be in this intense relationship with the other person—a little bit like therapy,” Hubbard said.

The oral histories have also become the basis for Schulman’s next book, which Farrar, Straus and Giroux will publish in 2021. Her approach to the material is at once unsentimental and resolutely personal. As she writes in her Oral History statement, the project calls on the same sense of

“THEY WANTED TO BRING IN PEOPLE OF COLOR AND KEEP THE ORGANIZATION THE SAME —and that’s an unreasonable demand.”

responsibility with which she’d been raised to regard the Holocaust: for remembering the dead, identifying the perpetrators, and “refusing revisionism” in a story of mass death. Her new book will push against the view of ACT UP as an organization of primarily affluent white gay men.

Over the years, Schulman has been wary of the way queer stories tend to enter the mainstream—homogenized and flattering to straight audiences—and has argued forcefully against the diminishment she sees. “People are talking about some remarkable similarities between the hit musical [*Rent*] and Sarah Schulman’s novel *People in Trouble*,” read a 1997 item in this magazine. That 1990 book concerned an AIDS-era love triangle among queer New York artists and activists; the non-Puccini portions of the 1996 musical bear a clear resemblance to the novel, both in the outlines of relationships and in specific plot points. The crucial difference, of course, is that in the book, the queer characters are the center of the story, where in Jonathan Larson’s musical, they’re pushed to the side. “Schulman is angrier about the depiction in *Rent* of gay people and the AIDS crisis than any allegedly lifted material,” wrote the reporter. The musical sent the message that “straight people are the heroic center of the AIDS crisis,” Schulman told him. (The episode became the kernel of her 1998 book, *Stagestruck*, on the recent commodification of queer culture.)

The Lesbian Avengers, a group Schulman co-founded in 1992, carried the oppositional spirit of ACT UP in new directions. The journalist and City College professor Linda Villarosa recalled finding herself in Schulman’s social circle in those years: “I remember her being so smart, so intense—you know, somebody who just really stuck to their guns and made things happen.” Things like the Dyke March: an annual permit-free protest march ahead of official Pride events,

orchestrated by the Lesbian Avengers and staged in New York for the first time in 1993. “I was like, ‘What? A human being can just do that?’” Villarosa said. “You could decide that lesbians were going to take over part of the street? Be topless?”

As queer people were increasingly invited to identify with mainstream power in the ’90s and aughts—as gay rights gained purchase, as Pride went corporate—new questions arose. The movement from outsider to insider, to identifying with power, presents a crucial turn in *Conflict Is Not Abuse*. How might people who were once oppressed then become oppressors? For Schulman, this reckoning arrived in 2009, when she was invited to give a talk at Tel Aviv University about *Ties That Bind*, her book on familial homophobia. A friend told her she couldn’t go—there was a boycott. *What boycott?* Schulman wondered. “So I started to find out about it, and I realized that I couldn’t go.”

She declined the invitation and began to examine how she’d come to this pass. “I had to face all the prejudices I’d been raised with,” she told me. Having grown up with the specter of the Holocaust, she confronted the possibility that Jews, having been victims, might now be perpetrators as well—and that, in fact, the ways that they’d been victims in the past might blind them to their own power to abuse. “I came to this very, very late, and I feel very badly about that,” she said. “At some point, if you want to have a real life, you have to say, ‘I did that then, this is why I did it, but I don’t have to do it.’ It’s possible to do that. You don’t have to be a martyr or a saint to do that.”

The subtitle of *Conflict Is Not Abuse* is “Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair.” The last of those three phrases is one Schulman also uses in *The Cosmopolitans*—the novel she published the same year as *Conflict Is Not Abuse*. Set in the 1950s, it centers on two friends in New York City who

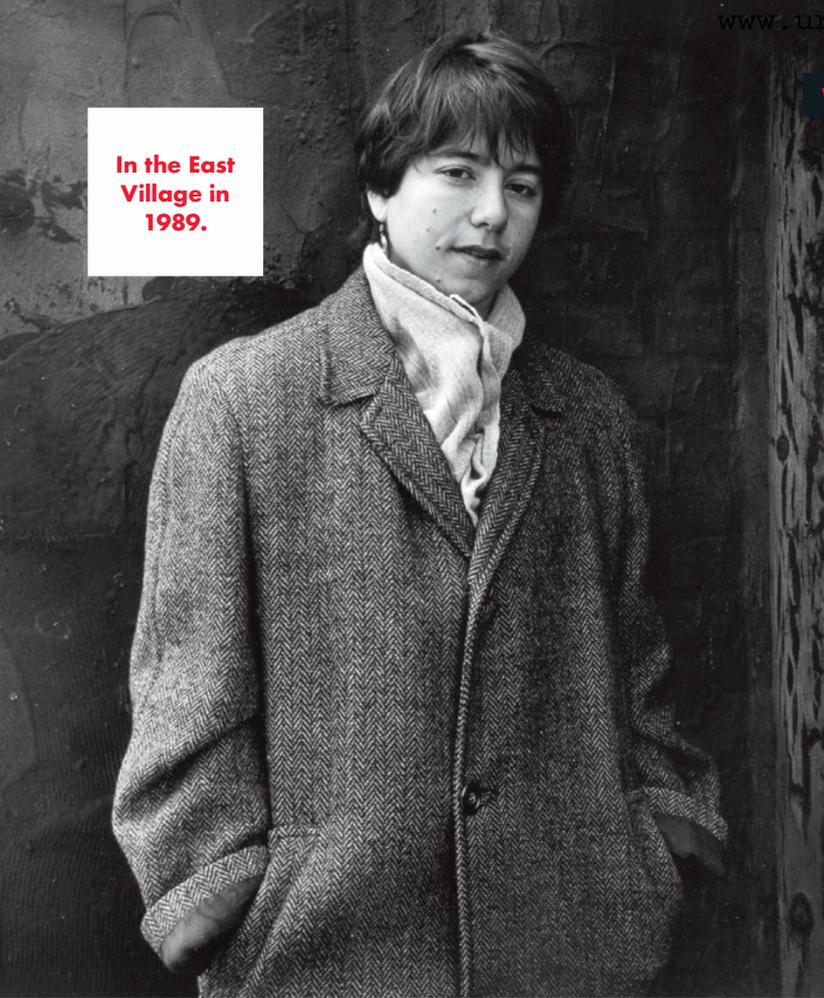
have lived next door to each other for 30 years. “I know there is cruelty in life,” *The Cosmopolitans*’ heroine says. “But I believe that it can be followed by reconciliation.” She says she believes “in the duty of repair.” Life in a family, in a community, in a place like New York City, seems to demand a belief that repair and resolution are possible, and that their pursuit is necessary, if we’re all going to keep living together.

PERHAPS SCHULMAN’S MOST provocative move in *Conflict Is Not Abuse* is her insistence that overstatement of harm happens everywhere: People in power who face criticism can overstate harm, but people who have previously suffered—who have lived through real harm—can do it too. For those in positions of dominance, she told me, “opposition feels like an attack.” Meanwhile, for those who have survived trauma, “it’s sometimes so hard to just keep it together that being asked to be self-critical can feel like your whole world is going to fall apart.” The explanation is different, but the result can be similar.

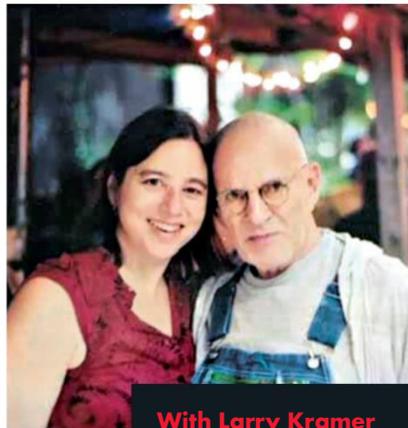
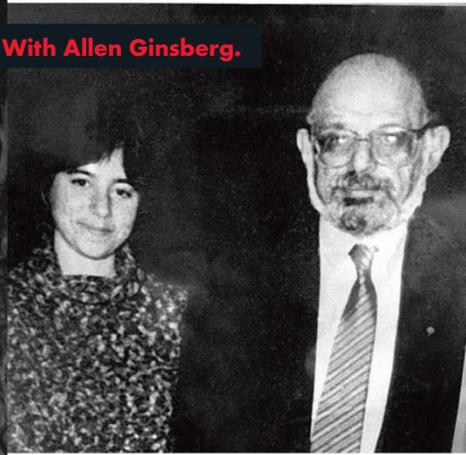
For readers focused on establishing the gravity and reality of domestic abuse, Schulman’s critical scrutiny of the term’s use may seem counterproductive. Her broader point, though, is that we live in “a culture of underreaction to abuse and overreaction to conflict,” as she writes. “Abuse” happens in situations where one person has direct power over the other; her analysis of “conflict” concerns situations of mutual participation, or in which the powerful person is in denial.

These distinctions may be clearer in Schulman’s telling than in real life, where the question of who has power (a pop star? A music critic? The pop star’s army of online fans?) can prove more elusive than one would hope. At the same time, Schulman’s refusal to flatten human experience into politically useful platitudes—she doubts, for example, that “no” always

In the East Village in 1989.



With Allen Ginsberg.



With Larry Kramer at Le Petit Versailles on Schulman's 50th birthday.

The Women's Liberation Zap Action Brigade, which interrupted the April 1981 Senate hearings on a bill that sought to ban abortion.



With Jim Hubbard in 2003 before filming an interview for the ACT UP Oral History Project.



With Jack Waters and Kara Walker at a Visual AIDS event.

means “no”—will alarm some readers no matter what.

Even before the book was published, it was subject to a backlash on Tumblr. “People were furious about this book,” the writer and podcaster merritt k told me. “Just the title sparked so much outrage. People saw *Conflict Is Not Abuse* and basically thought, *Oh, this is someone telling me that I wasn't abused.*” A friend and fan of Schulman's, she took to Goodreads, writing a positive if measured review. “Many of the examples Schulman describes resonated with me, also a queer woman, but they may ring hollow to those outside these communities,” she allowed.

Schulman believes that those who read her book as denying their own experiences of abuse are misunderstanding her, but she also seems interested in the defensiveness the book provokes. She heard from one reader who was upset that *Conflict Is Not Abuse* “made her question whether the partner she had accused of being abusive really was abusive,” she told me. “She saw that as an assault, that it made her doubt herself.”

Rankine told me that she and Schulman talked a lot about the title of the book and the question of whether conflict itself might at a certain point become abusive. “I felt our position on that is different,” she said. “I do feel like there's a moment when you can't really put yourself in that position again—to be in a position of conflict willingly, because the trauma and abuse is too much.” She acknowledged a kind of utopian strain in her friend's thinking. “Sarah is committed to action—things becoming newly formed,” she said. “In that way, I think she's a greater optimist than I am.”

Surely, progress for broken people and broken countries demands some belief in the possibility of repair. Schulman's analysis of our political straits doesn't come with a to-do list of actions for directly tackling the structural problems she recognizes. She warns that we enhance state power when we call the police, but she doesn't prescribe how to attack it at the root. Seeing why a violent cop might behave the way he does is one thing; getting that cop to understand his own behavior with enlightened self-awareness is a greater challenge.

A more serious criticism, then, might have to do with practical application of *Conflict Is Not Abuse*. Reading Schulman's book is invigorating: It offers the experience of reconsidering the world around you and bumping up against habits of mind you didn't realize you had. It's hard to imagine finishing it without (Continued on page 77)

Vox



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➔ FOR YEARS, we've asked famous people to talk about the mundane things they buy over and over again: their favorite thickening hair spray, say, or high-octane electric toothbrush. This month, eBay, in partnership with the Strategist, decided to host an auction that turns this premise around. We went back to some of our favorite celebrity shoppers to ask them about items they can live without and would be willing to sell at auction for charity, with all proceeds going to the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (eBay is receiving and donating all proceeds and matching every dollar the auction earns). Our group of donors is not donating anything humdrum, though—every object (from a Betsey Johnson wedding dress to Pepa's "Push It"-themed snowboard) is entirely one of a kind. On the following pages, 12 more lots to bid on.

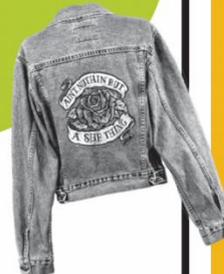
REAL GOOD!

WHAT I CAN LIVE WITHOUT

RIDE ON
**SANDRA
"PEPA"
DENTON'S**
"PUSH IT"-THEMED
SNOWBOARD



MAKE YOUR
FALL JACKET *the ONE*
**CHERYL
"SALT"
JAMES**
WORE on *LETTERMAN*



BID ON: Signed limited-edition Salt-N-Pepa for Lifebeat x Burton snowboard owned by Sandra "Pepa" Denton of Salt-N-Pepa ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$1

"We made this deck in collaboration with Lifebeat, a nonprofit that raises HIV/AIDS awareness, and Burton Snowboards. I think it's brilliant—it has our lyrics on it in this great graphic font. Until now, it hung in my rec room."

BID ON: Custom Levi's denim jacket worn by Cheryl "Salt" James of Salt-N-Pepa ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$1

"In 1995, we found out we'd be performing 'Ain't Nuthin' But a She Thing' on *David Letterman*. Our stylist picked up these Levi's jean jackets for us to wear, and 25 years later, I can remember how strong and confident I felt in it."



HOST a
ONE-PERSON
GALA in

**HARI
NEF'S
GOWN**

BID ON: Gucci gown worn by Hari Nef to the 2017 LACMA Art+Film Gala ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$250

"They made a handful of these dresses custom for certain clients. That's why I chose it, because you couldn't buy it in a store—that, and it's so flamboyant. That night, I met Jane Fonda in this dress."

Get Married in

BETSEY JOHNSON'S

"RAGGY" WEDDING DRESS



BID ON: Never-produced wedding dress designed by Betsey Johnson ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$50

"In the 1980s, I designed three wedding dresses. But I never went into production with them because they would have been too expensive. One I gave to my granddaughter, one I sold at a yard sale, and this one is the third. I call it the 'Raggy' wedding dress because the skirt kind of looks like a shredded rag in a very couture way."

LINGER OUTSIDE LONGER in

**CATHERINE
ZETA-JONES'S**

Bug-Repellent **SHAWL**



BID ON: Shoo for Good mosquito-repellent shawl signed by Catherine Zeta-Jones ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$50

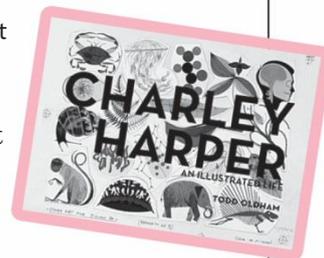
"This wrap repels mosquitoes. The bane of my life is being mosquito bitten—my eyelids get swollen and I get hot flashes. It's a chic, lightweight, very practical, lovely wrap."

START SOME COCKTAIL-PARTY BANTER with

TODD OLDHAM'S
Rare **CHARLEY HARPER BOOK**

BID ON: Signed copy of Todd Oldham's out-of-print book *Charley Harper: An Illustrated Life* ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$50

"In the early aughts, Charley Harper and I put together a book of his work. We printed 250 copies of four editions. Almost all sold immediately, but I held on to a few. Charley and I signed every copy; they ended up being the last he signed in his life."



PLAY
HOUSEWIFE
WITH

DENISE RICHARDS'S DRESS

(FROM *THE RHOBH* OPENING CREDITS)



BID ON: Denise Richards's dress worn in the opening credits of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* season nine ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$50

"The producers told us to go with something purple for season nine, which happened to be very hard to find that spring. After trying a few on and sending photos of them to the producers, we agreed on my personal favorite: a simple cocktail dress, whose designer none of us can remember. The sequence shot is a very well-oiled machine, and the best part was getting to hold the giant diamond for the first time ever. The diamond is iconic."

ONE
OF

LEON BRIDGES'S

50 Pairs of ENGRAVED SHADES



BID ON: Pair of AHLEM x Leon Bridges limited-edition sunglasses ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$95

"I did these with the designer Ahlem Manai-Platt: We decided to release 50 pairs in conjunction with my vinyl for *Good Thing*. The frames were electro-dipped in 22-karat gold and engraved with lyrics from my single 'Bad Bad News.' I wore them to the release party at the Greek Theatre. They looked fly."

Wear NICKY HILTON'S LEATHER JACKET

(That Paris Hilton
Once Borrowed)

BID ON: Marc Jacobs leather jacket worn by Nicky Hilton ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$100

"Victoria Beckham inspired me to buy this maroon Marc Jacobs leather motorcycle jacket. In 2011, I saw a photograph of her wearing it in a magazine and said, 'I need it!' My sister, Paris, has borrowed it, too; she loves anything pink, and I'd say maroon falls in the pink family."



ACQUIRE DEBBY RYAN'S

(SURPRISINGLY
EXTENSIVE)

PIN COLLECTION



BID ON: Madewell denim jacket signed and customized by Debby Ryan ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$50

"This comes with a 'We Are Starfoxy' pin (a gift for the cast of *Cover Versions*) and one I got in the Guatemala airport after Adria Arjona's wedding."

Spin

PHOEBE BRIDGERS'S EARLY-VERSION VINYL



BID ON: Signed test pressings of Phoebe Bridgers's vinyl albums *Punisher* and *Stranger in the Alps* ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$40

"A test press is the sample of a musician's vinyl record that's created to make sure the final vinyl record isn't fucked up. They're never released to the public. And, to me, these pressings are the most ceremonious version of my music."

DROWN
OUT the
NOISE with

ROXANE GAY'S FAVORITE (PINK) HEADPHONES



BID ON: Unused pink Bose QC35 headphones owned by Roxane Gay ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$50

"Everyone I know swears by these Bose headphones. I travel constantly, and that means having to listen to a lot of people when I don't want to. These just drown out sound—my wife, too, never leaves our New York City home without them. They're the best antisocial device."

INVEST IN A

THAKOON BLAZER

THAT THAKOON PANICHGUL SAYS
WILL LAST FOREVER

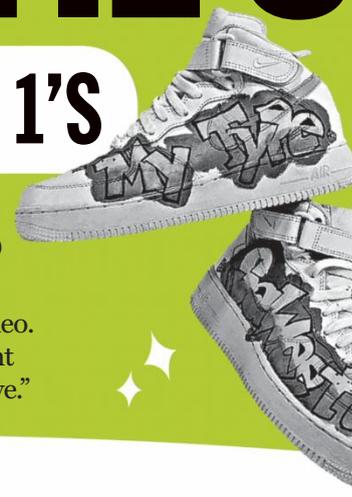


BID ON: One-of-a-kind blazer designed by Thakoon Panichgul ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$50

"I designed this blazer in 2018, but it was never produced in this colorway. This is the only one that exists. I could've donated a sequin jacket or dress, but they're just showpieces. This was created in a navy double-faced wool plaid fabric that'll never break down."

Kick Around in

SAWEETIE'S CUSTOM AIR FORCE 1'S



BID ON: Customized Nike Air Force 1's worn by Saweetie in the "My Type" video ♦ **STARTING PRICE:** \$500

"I thought it would be dope to hang some customized sneakers from a basketball rim in my 'My Type' music video. Luckily, the artist Terrance Marley agreed to spray-paint graffiti on a pair of Air Force 1's. I saw them and fell in love."

PHOTOGRAPHS: BROADIMAGE/SHUTTERSTOCK (NICKY HILTON); BRAYOMEDIA (DENISE RICHARDS); KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES FOR GOD'S LOVE WE DELIVER (LEON BRIDGES); AL PEREIRA/GETTY IMAGES/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES (SALT-N-PEPA); FILMMAGIC/FILMMAGIC (PHOEBE BRIDGERS); AXELLE/BAUER-GRIFFIN/FILMMAGIC (HARI NEF); CHRIS WEEKS/GETTY IMAGES (CATHERINE ZETA-JONES); GARY GERSHOFF/GETTY IMAGES (THAKOON PANICHGUL); MATCHFIRE (PRODUCTS); COURTESY OF SUBJECTS (REMAINING)



Approachable, Unusual Hikes

So many more New Yorkers are hiking this summer. In order to avoid the dozens of other people who had the same idea to spend their Saturday at Bear Mountain, **Nikita Richardson** talked to three rangers and three frequent hikers and found a selection of surprising, slightly less popular options (including one with a pen of poison-ivy-eating goats) that are suitable for even the least experienced of hikers.

➔ **Avoid Breakneck Ridge.** Longtime popular hiking spots like Harriman State Park, Bear Mountain, Minnewaska State Park Preserve, and Breakneck Ridge are especially overrun at the moment. “We open at 9 a.m., and there are hundreds of cars waiting to get in,” says Eric Humphrey, manager of Minnewaska State Park Preserve. “So even coming early isn’t necessarily the best solution.” With the pandemic crowds in mind, in June, the New York State Parks Department released the NY State Parks Explorer app, which features more than 246 parks, historical sites, and recreation trails as well as details on when they’re open, what amenities are available, and directions. The app makes it easy to find less-busy alternatives—rangers suggest searching in the section called “Hidden Gems” (one recommendation there: Sterling Forest State Park, where hikers can see songbirds, hawks, and the occasional black bear). ➔ **If you’re carless, pick something accessible by train.** Melissa “Click” Goodwin, a Brooklyn-based hiking guide, recommends the Sugarloaf Hill–Osborn Loop Trail, which starts in the parking lot at the Garrison Metro-North station, is mostly flat, and features abandoned buildings and graffiti. Afterward, she says, stop at nearby Dolly’s for a soft-shell-crab roll. Or take the same train to Tarrytown, where you can grab a taxi to the entrance of Rockefeller State Park Preserve, a former country estate of the Rockefeller family with 45 miles of 16-foot-wide paths. Fifty minutes north, there’s the Fishkill Ridge Trail, which is an 11-minute taxi ride from the Beacon station and known for its steep upward climb (and oft-circling turkey vultures, bald eagles, and falcons), and the significantly easier Riverfront Trail in Long Dock Park, which abuts the Beacon stop and passes by a factory that once churned out bricks (some of which of which ended up in the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center). ➔ **If you have a car, drive to Dutchess County.** Mike Todd, founder of Hike the Hudson Valley, likes the 14,000-acre Fahnestock State Park (a 90-minute drive from the city) and, in particular, the 1.5-mile-long, kid-friendly Pelton Pond Trail. The parking lot generally has spots, he says, and there are often beavers congregated around the pond. For a slightly longer hike, Todd recommends heading to the nearby Staatsburgh State Historic Site, where the 65-room Beaux-Arts Mills Mansion marks the beginning of a trail that goes right up against the Hudson River—so close you can dip your feet in. If you don’t mind a slightly longer drive (about two hours), take the ADA-compliant Ashokan Rail Trail in Ulster County, recommended by Rita Shaheen, director of parks at Scenic Hudson. The entrance has a pen of goats, which are brought out to eat poison ivy on the property. ➔ **Don’t count out New Jersey.** The New York–New Jersey Trail Conference is an excellent resource for finding less-populous hikes as close to the New York state line as Ringwood State Park and as far as Washington Crossing (which hugs the border of Pennsylvania), according to Justin Bailey, a New York State licensed hiking guide. The site recommends against visiting the typically overrun Wawayanda State Park. Instead, try the Ringwood Manor Trail, an 80-minute drive from the city. About a two-hour loop, it starts at a 210-year-old Federal-style estate of iron magnates Peter Cooper and Abram S. Hewitt. And if you want to swim, the nearby 3.5-mile Monument Trail Loop off Route 23 features access to the famously clear-watered Lake Marcia. ➔ **Or just hike in the city.** In Brooklyn, there’s the Ravine in Prospect Park, which was designed by Olmsted and Vaux with the Adirondacks in mind, winds through waterfalls and a small gorge and is considered Brooklyn’s sole forest. Or take the ferry to Staten Island and hike through High Rock Park, a 2,800-acre conservancy with six walking trails. Tara Abell, Vulture editor and Staten Island native, recommends the relatively flat 12-mile Blue Trail, which “is so wooded you feel like you’re upstate” and takes you to Todt Hill, one of the highest points on the Eastern Seaboard. And if you want to end up in Manhattan, there’s the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail, which starts in Yonkers and runs 26 miles to Cortlandt. To access it from the city, take the 4 train to Woodlawn, then Westchester’s Country 20 Bee-Line bus to Central Park Avenue. It’s worth taking the three-and-a-half-hour (completely flat) walk from Yonkers to Tarrytown, where you can easily pop out onto Sunnyside Lane to peek into Washington Irving’s estate and, a mile north, railroad magnate Jay Gould’s Gothic Revival mansion, where you can see the half-destroyed remains of a Lord & Burnham greenhouse and a garden that contains 500 roses set in three concentric rings.

THE LOOK BOOK GOES TO

Pace Gallery

In East Hampton, where Sotheby's, Michael Werner, and Skarstedt have also opened temporary spaces nearby.

INTERVIEWS BY JANE STARR
DRINKARD AND BROCK COLYAR



KARYN OX

Jeweler, East Hampton and Soho

What brought you to the galleries?

Well, I guess you know a bunch of them moved here from New York, so I just decided to walk from my house to check some of them out. I've had my eye on a Keith Haring picture at Sotheby's. I've been in my East Hampton place since April. My children moved out here with their dogs in March, and I joined them. We are a quarantine pod of three dogs and five people.

And who are those two?

In my right arm is Frank the Pom, who I share with my daughter. Before the pandemic, she'd go on trips without telling me and Frank the Pom would still be at my house. I'd be like, "How did you leave? Your dog is still here." The other one is Scarlett; she's 15. I used to have Stella, too, who died last year. She was another white Maltese.

So you like Maltese?

They match my décor. I'm usually very colorful, so it's nice to have a non-colorful dog.

THE LOOK BOOK: EAST HAMPTON



MICHAEL SCHOEN
CEO, Montauk



VANESSA LEWIS
Sales representative, East Hampton and Kew Gardens

→ **What's the real-estate scene been like in the Hamptons this summer?** Crazy. Like, I recently helped this strictly quarantined hedge-fund-billionaire type, who has this gorgeous \$20 million estate, find a separate house just for his full-time staff.



NOEL ROBERTS
Real-estate agent, East Hampton

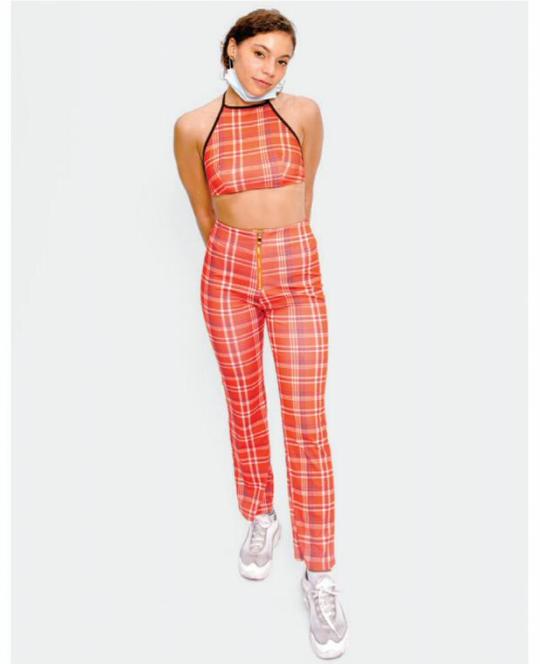


SOPHIE DANZIGER
Student and waitress, Bohemia

← **What brings you to Pace today?**
Oh, I'm not here for the art. Me and my friends are just out shopping. We were trying to go to Brandy Melville, but it's closed. So now we're going to Lululemon instead.



BRIAN HASTINGS
Real-estate agent, Miami Beach and midtown Manhattan



MARINA STORY
Student, Long Island City



ZOE WARITZ
Marketing director, East Village



MEGAN RILEY
Consultant, Miami Beach



NICK CINQUE
Sales director, Amagansett

↳ **What'd you come to see?** Just to check out Pace. I know the guy who runs it, and my daughter randomly is interning here this summer. Having the galleries in town is a new thing, and it's so much more convenient than trekking to Chelsea.



STEPHANIE ROACH
Gallery director, Upper East Side



HANK OLKEN
Architect, Greenpoint



ADRIENNE CONZELMAN
Art dealer, East Hampton and Fairfield, Connecticut



DANI FOREST
Executive assistant at Pace Gallery, East Village



MEREDITH DARROW
Art adviser, Sag Harbor

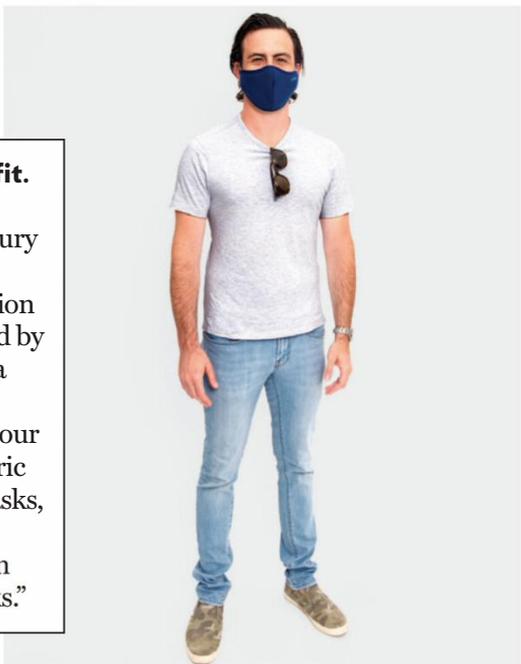


DOUGLAS BAXTER
President of Pace Gallery, Bridgehampton and midtown Manhattan



MORGAN CURTIS
Fashion designer, Sagaponack and Tribeca

← **Nice outfit.** It's mine; I design luxury sleepwear. This collection was inspired by a garden tea party. Now we're using our leftover fabric to make masks, too. We're calling them "glam masks."



JOHN WEISS
CEO, Upper East Side



MOHNA HOPPE
Real-estate agent, East Hampton Village

FOOD

MIXOLOGY

Another Round

A new book and some old stories from Dale DeGroff, the man who brought us drinks as we know them.

BY ROBIN RAISFELD AND ROB PATRONITE



DALE DEGROFF MAY BE best known for running the influential bar at the Rainbow Room (and for popularizing the polarizing term *mixologist*). But he should be more properly credited with building the foundation for the craft-cocktail revival: excavating the history, prioritizing the use of fresh juices, perfecting the technique, and, especially, inspiring and training the new generation of craftspeople (most notably Audrey Saunders) who went on to transform the national scene. Many more absorbed his wisdom, a unique distillate of mechanics and humanity, by reading his seminal *The Craft of the Cocktail*, first published in 2002. It's a testament to how much has changed in the worlds of bartending and booze that DeGroff has seen fit to revise that guide after 18 hardcover printings. *The New Craft of the Cocktail* (Clarkson Potter; \$35) comes out in September with 100 new recipes in a new format that includes recommended brands for every drink. Who better to speak to the future of the bar, a place whose very existence repudiates the notion of social distancing? We caught up with him just before cocktail hour at his new home in Pawcatuck, Connecticut, where he has taken his busy schedule of proselytizing for the lost and refound American art of the cocktail off the road and onto Zoom.

In the new introduction to the book, you write about teaching a tequila class at Windows on the World late into the night of September 10, 2001, and the aftermath of 9/11. It's something I'd always

wanted to do. This book came out in 2002, but it was in the can when 9/11 happened and I was really beside myself about not being able to say something about that. And now look what happens: The new edi-

tion is in the can once again, and the situation is even worse. If I do another edition, we might end up with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

You saw bars come back after 9/11. How do you think the industry will ultimately respond to COVID-19? I don't know what's going to happen. I'm not a seer. But I'm very, very optimistic. Food and alcoholic beverages and people gathering around them goes back to ancient times. They unearthed bars in Pompeii when they started digging into that volcanic ash.

Considering that the bar is defined by intimacy, do you envision it changing its very nature to adapt to today's predicament? No, I envision a vaccination solving that problem.

There's been a lot of advancement in professional bartending since you wrote your first book. What's left to teach? I didn't really go into technique heavily in this book, but there are some fundamental things that a lot of craft bartenders are trying to skip over. You start to lose a lot if you don't pay your dues and work your way through the ingredients the way a chef who's staging does. You need to understand flavors. You can't walk into a bar, work for two years, and then go out and become a consultant and say you're gonna create menus around the world. It just doesn't work that way. Hospitality's not like that either; hospitality's something that, if you have the propensity for it, if you have the character for it and the people skills, it's something even then that you learn on the job.

Is that how you did it? Yeah, I was lucky back in the '70s to work with a couple Irish bartenders who were just masters of this. Right back to my first experience in New York: I walked into a neighborhood bar, and there was an old man behind the bar. I was a hippie with a guitar and a backpack. Every head turned; they looked at me when I hit that door like a side dish they hadn't ordered. And I sat down and Al comes over and says, "What'll it be, young man?" And by the way, when I walked in, the guy sitting in the corner let out a big groan. It turned out he was the owner. Al paid no attention to him. And as soon as Al came over and greeted me, with like a real cordial greeting, suddenly the whole attitude of all the other old dudes at the bar changed. Because Al made the call: This guy's all right. How do you learn that stuff except by experiencing it on either side of the bar over the years as you work?

How do you describe this type of skill?

It's understanding the interaction between you and the guest on a deeper level. Developing the observational powers. Did you notice the eyes on that woman when she tasted her margarita, that it was way too sour for her? To see that ... because if you did, you have to go over there. You have to talk to her about it. There's so many little things that you can't explain, really; either you see them and react to them or you don't.

What's the biggest difference between the cocktail world when your book first came out and now? Bar teams. It used to be that bartenders were pitted against one another. We all had our own registers. In the old Irish bars on the East Side of Manhattan, the owner would say, "Hey, Joe, Tom rang \$3,000 on his register last Saturday; you rang \$1,500. A couple more nights like that, I'm going to have to put someone else on that register." It was a cut-throat kind of feeling. Now, the whole idea of community blows my mind: what the Speed Rack ladies are doing, what Tony Abou-Ganim is doing with the Helen David Relief Fund, what happened to the head bartender Murray Stenson at Zig Zag who had open-heart surgery based on two weeks' donations from around the world because he didn't have health insurance.

In your 45 or so years in the business, has there been much progress in terms of diversity in the workplace? There has been. But women were first, by the way. When I opened the Rainbow Room in 1987, I hired a huge staff because we had lots of private dining. So I had, like, 36 bartenders, and 16 of them were women. And [owner] Joe Baum came to me when I was scheduling all the bars and said, "I don't want to see the women behind the public bars." That's the way it was. There wasn't a single bar except for the strip joints in Times Square where there was a woman behind the bar. In any fancy midtown hotel, any fancy midtown cocktail lounge, or any fancy midtown restaurant, there were no women behind the bar. Now, of course, women own—and have for some time—many of the best bars in the city. People of color have lagged behind women. And now that's starting to change. I see it everywhere in the general marketplace, maybe not as much as the craft market.

Lots of bars have taken to bottling their drinks and selling them to go. Are you in favor? Absolutely. Are you kidding? It goes back to Jerry Thomas. He called the cocktail ideal for fishing and outdoor activities. He has recipes for bottled cocktails in the 1862 *How to Mix Drinks*.

Mad About Martinis

Two takes, the DeGrossian way.



Extra-Dry Martini

3 drops Noilly Prat extra-dry vermouth

3 ounces Beefeater gin (my choice for session martinis)

1 lemon-peel coin

1 pitted Manzanilla cocktail olive (no pimento), for garnish

Stir the vermouth and the gin in a mixing glass with ice—50 times if using large ice, 30 times if using small cubes. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Express the lemon peel over the top of the drink and discard. Garnish with the olive.



Second Chance Martini

1½ ounces Hendrick's gin

1½ ounces Reyka vodka

½ ounce Martini Riserva Speciale Ambrato vermouth

4 dashes Dale DeGross's Pimento Aromatic Bitters

freshly cut thin round of English cucumber, for garnish

Assemble the first four ingredients in a mixing glass or martini beaker, fill with ice, and stir. Strain into a large, chilled cocktail glass and garnish with the cucumber slice.

Have you ever done one yourself?

I have. I took it on the road for an industry event in upstate New York at an inn on Lake Placid. They wanted to do Jerry Thomas cocktails, so we put them in bottles in the bottom of the ice-cold lake. We just threw them off the end of the dock in a net and then pulled them up when we were ready to drink. I'm actually involved in a product that I can't talk about now.

What kind? I can't say. But what I can talk about is that my partner, Ted Breaux, who brought absinthe back to America, and I, we're going to be doing an after-dinner Italian-style amaro. We have a label and everything; it's just not on the market yet.

Do you see craft-cocktail-making and bartending moving into the home like online shopping and watching movies? It already did. The home cocktail party was invented during Prohibition. They were a huge hit during Prohibition, and they continued to be a huge hit after Prohibition. But when people could go back to bars, they did in droves. You can have both.

So the bar is not an endangered species? Absolutely not. I mean, there's nothing worse than having to make your own martini.

Let's go to the lightning round, as they say: What's always in your fridge? Vermouth, sweet and dry, and sherry, usually fino. Almost always a bottle of Champagne. Right now: Narragansett beer because I'm up here on the Rhode Island border.

Sounds good. Can or bottle? I like a long-neck bottle. I drink it over ice. I know people think that's crazy, but I love it that way.

What's the last cocktail you drank? A new variation on the Vesper I came up with called a Second Chance martini.

How many cocktail books do you own? I gave a lot to the Museum of the American Cocktail recently. I went down from over a thousand to a couple hundred.

Do you spend more time reading about cocktails than you do drinking cocktails? Nope!

What's a trend you hate? I hate lay-backs, No. 1. I hate the idea of the ice luge and anything to do with people pouring booze into people's mouths. I think it really fuels the few neo-Prohibitionists that are still around.

They don't offer you one in prison, but what would be your death-row cocktail? Well, I would have it with my dinner. I would start with an extra-dry martini, then I'd have some steak tartare, then I'd have another martini, then I'd have some oysters, then I'd have another martini, and I'd finish with a stinger. Three martinis and a stinger, that's the way I'd go out.

FOOD



TASTE TEST

Everything But the Twist

Instant Negronis, from bar to door.

THE AMAZING THING about the Negroni is that the complex result is completely out of whack with the nitwit simplicity involved in whipping one up. Just build the drink in an iced rocks glass following the classic 1:1:1 specs, stir, garnish with an orange peel, and have at it. Even if you jumble the gin-vermouth-Campari ratios, whether intentionally or not, it's still delicious. You cannot botch a Negroni. Another thing about the Negroni is that it refutes that tiresome argument about not ordering things in bars and restaurants you can make as well at home. Negronis are too damn good, so why deprive yourself just because you've left the house? And yet there comes a time in the life of every pajama-clad pandemic homebody when the mind goes and the muscles weaken and even the minuscule effort it takes to pour three types of liquid into a glass seems to daunt and baffle. That is the time to support your neighborhood bar and order a pre-batched cocktail delivered to your door. Luckily, Negronis abound on pandemic delivery menus and are transported in bottles and jars and deli containers alongside the morsels of food that current statutes require accompany them. We stocked up on ice, got out our citrus peeler, and summoned a representative sampling from our Negroni-drenched delivery zone. Here's how they fared. **R.R. & R.P.**

Negronis to Go

① **Dante's Negroni**

Funny to think that way back when, Campari and Negronis were generally considered too bitter for American palates. Now, aficionados gripe that Negronis are often too sweet. That must be the thinking behind the folks at Dante who tweak the traditional 1:1:1 ratios and go long and strong on the gin—a crisp and citrusy 94-proof Bombay Sapphire—to offset the sweetness. It's a Negroni that will put hair on your chest, and it comes in three sizes (8 oz., \$28; 375 ml., \$47; and 750 ml., \$93). Get it with a mortadella panino.

② **I Sodi's Negroni Classico**

Some consider I Sodi the house that Negronis and lasagna built; now, you can lap up both in the comfort of your own home. The “classico” is supersmooth and about as well-balanced as a Simone Biles triple double dismount; credit the unusual dueling vermouths (half-Dolin Rouge, half-Punt e Mes). And the elegant presentation—hefty corked apothecary-style bottle wrapped tightly in red tissue paper—makes it feel like a Christmas present (375 ml., \$30).

③ **PDT's Negroni**

As befits its speakeasy source, this rich, round Negroni arrives in a glass mini-flask with its ingredients printed on the label: Campari, of course, plus the versatile bartenders' favorite Fords gin and Martini Gran Lusso, a rare anniversary vermouth bottling. What better to complement it than a Spicy Redneck, a bacon-wrapped hot dog with chili, pickled jalapeño, and coleslaw (3.5 oz., \$12)?

④ **Attaboy's Negroni**

They send you the drink in a plastic deli takeout container, but they make up for it by throwing in a gorgeous hand-carved chunk of crystal-clear ice in a Ziploc bag (plus a vending-machine-size packet of Flamin' Hot Cheetos). Clever casting, too: The soft Plymouth gin has

what a rom-com-film critic would call great chemistry with its pruney Cocchi Vermouth di Torino co-star (3 oz., \$15).

⑤ **Hearth's Negroni**

For purists, a Negroni isn't a Negroni without Campari. For the drinks mavens at Hearth, the absence of Campari is the selling point. In its place, they use Bèrto Red Bitter, an aperitivo made in Piedmont since the late 19th century. And seeing that chef-owner Marco Canora goes to the trouble of milling his own pasta flour, you'd be remiss not to order the summery canestri alla Norma with eggplant, tomato, and ricotta salata (8 oz., \$19).

⑥ **Vic's Classic Negroni**

The medicinal bite might be the Cinzano 1757, a Campari-owned vermouth brand known for its signature notes of wormwood and resin. Food softens the blow—especially chef Hillary Sterling's gobsmacking take on onion rings: buttermilk-brined, rice-flour-coated, deep-fried petals blasted with Parmesan and dried tomato (4 oz., \$15).

⑦ **Campari Bottled Negroni**

To get in on America's Never-Ending Negroni Craze, Milan-based Campari began bottling its own premixed version of that cocktail in liter bottles a few years ago. Tasting note from our judges: “Strong and sweet and eerily reminiscent—not in a bad way—of the Italian hard candies dear old Nonna would keep in a bowl on the dining-room table” (\$36.96 at Astor Wines & Spirits).

⑧ **St. Agrestis's Box of Negronis**

Is there a better way to prepare for the apocalypse than stocking your bunker cooler with a 1.75-liter box of Negronis (good, they say, for about 20 drinks)? This Brooklyn spirits company's super-spicy recipe is for those who like their Negronis as rich and robust as a mug of Swedish glögg (\$60).



THE UNDERGROUND GOURMET QUICK BITE

Botanica Bar

47 E. Houston St., nr. Mulberry St.
212-343-7251



UNLESS THEY WISH to incur the governor's wrath, New York's beleaguered bars must accompany their takeout libations with a hearty bite of food. It was for that reason that Mark Connell, owner of Botanica Bar on the Lower East Side, had made sure to stock up on Wonder bread and Skippy peanut butter earlier in the pandemic. (For the previous 24 years, he says, regulars had subsisted on potato chips and peanuts.) But Connell knew that he could do better, and several weeks ago, he installed an electric pizza oven in the back room of the subterranean bar and enlisted the services of Adam Baumgart, a chef with whom he'd worked a decade ago at the now-shuttered Bluebird Coffee Shop. At that time, Baumgart won fans for his pastries, including a pistachio-cardamom doughnut that he somewhat scandalously baked rather than fried. Now, he's turned his attention to pizzas (\$18 to \$21)—**14-inch rounds he calls "sourdough New York style"** made with organic flour, Bianco DiNapoli tomatoes (the terrific sauce sideline of Phoenix-based pizza guru Chris Bianco), and high-grade toppings that include housemade fennel sausage and Greenmarket squash blossoms (below). These are applied to a thin crust with a moderately puffy, blackened-in-spots rim that possesses a tangy, sturdy chew. The four pies currently on offer can be had to go or for consumption at 30 sidewalk and street seats clustered under a couple of canopy tents that have come in handy for monsoon season. The plan is to cultivate a pizza-eating clientele and spin off the project into its own nearby shop once bar life (and capacity) returns to normal.



Cutlets Sandwich Co.

cutlets.co



FOR PROUST, it was a crumbly French pastry. For Richard Zaro, scion of the well-known New York commuter-hub-bakery family, it's the **chicken-cutlet hero** that conjures up golden memories of childhood. And not just any chicken-cutlet hero, but the sandwiches found in profusion in the delis in and around the Westchester suburbs where he grew up. (Shout-out to Casa d'Italia in Harrison, Anthony's of Mamaroneck, and Firehouse, just across the Connecticut border.) They were the inspiration for Cutlets Sandwich Co., Zaro's first independent business venture: a shop that aims to re-create the essence of these sandwiches with better-than-average ingredients at a price point that competes with the Potbellies and Jimmy John's of the world. To Zaro's mind, the fast-casual category populated by brands like Sweetgreen, Dig Inn, and Dos Toros "hasn't been heroized yet." To exploit that niche, Zaro was about to commit to a midtown brick-and-mortar location when the city shut down; instead, he took a short-term lease on the closed kitchen of a Hell's Kitchen hotel and pivoted to an online delivery service that launched in late July. Although, as Zaro says, "We don't want to just be known for our cutlets," cutlets (well-fried and generously crumbed) are the featured ingredient in a third of the dozen signature combos, all served on rolls from Parisi Bakery. Also available are a house-roasted turkey (quite satisfying with its customary iceberg confetti and zingy red onion), thin and crisp eggplant "cutlets" (above), and the egg sandwiches any self-respecting metro-area deli wouldn't be without. Customers can also design their own combo with add-ons ranging from Nueske's bacon and Wisconsin cheddar to Lioni mozzarella and Tutto Calabria hot sauce. R.R. & R.P.

DESIGN HUNTING

These **windows** look west, across the rooftops of Brooklyn, taking in the Manhattan skyline.

THE GALLERY
→
“So this is our first apartment after getting married and blending our art,” says Kelly Marshall.

The **streetscape** was photographed by Dominic Sylvain. “He used to live in Chinatown. He has a great eye.”

Marshall took this **photograph** when she lived in Paris. “I gave myself a mandatory two-hour-a-day walking tour to take photographs, and this was taken from the top of the Pompidou Centre.”

She also hung a **light box** with slides on the wall.

Marshall’s circa-2018 **portrait** of Linda Jones, who is a postpartum doula and birth-justice activist in East Oakland, California.

The “**Clamshell**” **iBook** is circa 2000. “My husband loves his antique technology.”

The **leather-upholstered armchair** is from Pottery Barn. “I did a story for them, and they paid me in furniture.”



A Year in a Loft

Photographer Kelly Marshall and her husband, Dominic Sylvain, are enjoying the last



The screenprint on canvas is from the "Bulls Eye" series by San Francisco artist Bill Samios, as is **the birdhouse** dangling in front of it.

"My brother used to work in film in L.A.," Marshall says, "and he found rolls and rolls of these **Obama posters** in a factory warehouse he was shooting in. So he gave me one."

"I found this **Black doll** at the Alameda flea market in San Francisco," Marshall says. "I wouldn't say that I am a big collector of old Black stuff, but I just loved that. I thought, *He's going to be mine.*"

The **velvet sofa** from Anthropologie was bought from a friend who was moving out of the city.

"The **coffee table** my parents had when I was a kid, and that rug I bought in Istanbul when I was studying abroad in 1995."

The **ottoman pouf** was a gift from designer Rayman Boozer, who offered it to Marshall during a photo shoot at his apartment.

in Bushwick

days of their first apartment together in a converted warehouse. BY WENDY GOODMAN

DESIGN HUNTING

we find diversity and all those really tough questions.” But after a few trips to see this apartment, which they had found on StreetEasy, and exploring the neighborhood, “I had to begrudgingly agree that we made a fun choice to kind of step out of our zone and jump into another community,” Marshall admits. It is here that Marshall has been working on a documentary, *Birthing of a Nation*, about the fight to improve maternal health for Black women: “the legacy of Black women’s radical self-care and healing illustrated through the birth-justice movement,” as she puts it. But she won’t finish the film here: The rent hike was too high for them to renew the lease. She’ll miss the place, though not the recycling center across the street. “My husband basically soundproofed our bedroom,” she says, laughing. “We love this place, and if we could just pick it up and move it somewhere else, we would.” ■



In the Foyer
 “I love that thing,” Marshall says of the bench she found at Housing Works. “I just like to have a seat when you walk through the front door.”

Kelly Marshall and husband Dominic Sylvain.

ALWAYS HAD THE FANTASY OF LIVING in a warehouse,” says photographer Kelly Marshall of this rental—an 800-or-so-square-foot loft on the border of Bushwick and East Williamsburg—where she and her husband, private chef Dominic Sylvain, have spent the last year. “And if we were to buy, we’d never buy a warehouse”—partly because they aren’t easy to find—“so this was our opportunity to do it.” Marshall wasn’t sure about moving back to Brooklyn, where she’d lived when it wasn’t quite so tame, after having an apartment on Mulberry and Houston in Manhattan. “It was a conflicted story,” she admits. “I had lived in and out of New York since the ’90s, and me being a person of color while my husband is from Montreal, and his perspective of New York was so much different from mine, so there were a lot of interesting conversations about where will





The Kitchen

“We put up the shelving and moved appliances around, installed the ledge where the lamp is, and installed metro shelves with cutting board,” says Marshall. “The sink and cabinetry were there.”

On the Walls

The collaborative newsprint piece, *#blackhands*, is by George McCalman and Llane Alexis. Next to it, closer to the windows, is “a classic Parisian ad from the ‘60s. Dominic bought it from a grocer on the streets of Paris,” says Marshall. “Its translation: ‘When the husband comes home, the modern wife takes care of him.’”

The Bedroom

The walk-in closet to the left of the bed has a step that contains storage. The art above the bed is by Lisa Hunt: “It was a wedding present from Lisa,” Marshall says. The Matisse print is from MoMA, and the photograph of the pyramids is by Marshall.



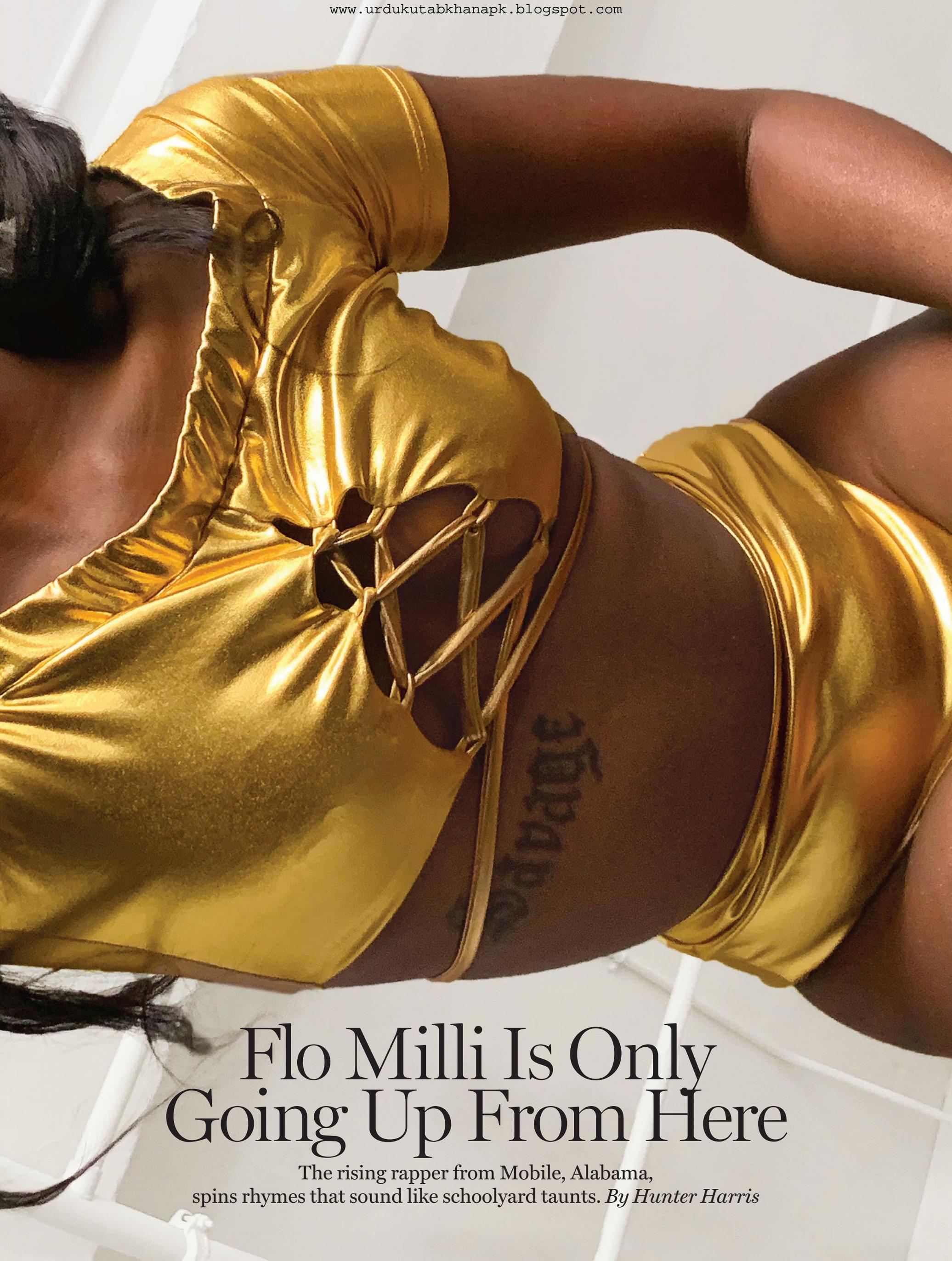
The bulletin board includes three 45-rpm records. “Dominic is into music,” she says. “We have records everywhere. He is a closeted DJ.”



The CULTURE PAGES



Photograph by Arielle Bobb-Willis



Flo Milli Is Only Going Up From Here

The rising rapper from Mobile, Alabama,
spins rhymes that sound like schoolyard taunts. *By Hunter Harris*

T

HE RAPPER FLO MILLI had given herself a deadline: She was going to be famous by 18. Not rapping by 18—famous by then. “It was like an obsession for me,” Milli, now all of 20 years old, tells me one July afternoon, dressed in full glam in her Atlanta apartment. As a tween, she’d seen Nicki Minaj rapping on BET’s *106 & Park*. She’d grown up around music—the women in her family singing in church choirs, her mom playing Jill Scott tracks on the way to school—but Flo (real name Tamia Monique Carter) didn’t trust her own singing voice. She decided to get a pen and paper and be a rapper instead. College was a backup plan she didn’t want to explore: “I was praying to God, like, ‘God, please don’t make me a doctor or anything. I want to be a rapper!’”

She missed her deadline by a year. Her viral song, “Beef FloMix,” got her signed to RCA Records, a division of Sony Music Entertainment. Last month, she released her first mixtape, a 12-song project titled *Ho, Why Is You Here?* At least three of the tracks are already internet popular: “Beef-FloMix,” the raunchy “In the Party,” and “Weak,” which takes a classic lovelorn SWV song and turns it love-annoyed: Instead of singing about a man’s dizzying effect on a woman, Flo Milli raps about being bored of easily manipulated men. “I feel like, as young women, you deal with haters, you deal with insecure men. Sometimes you just have people trying to bring you down. So it’s like, ‘Ho, why is you here?’” she says. “Are you contributing to my success, or are you, like, taking from it?”

Nothing has contributed more to Flo Milli’s success than the opening rhyme scheme on “Beef FloMix.” She raps with the disarming, cutesy facetiousness that has become her trademark. It’s playfully schoolyard, a cool girl’s “na-na na-na booboo”—style taunt; it’s a mantra and a meme all in one. “I like caaaash and my hair to my ass! / Do the dash, can you make it go fast?” she asks. “Fuck the fame, all I want is them bands / If she keep on muggin’, I’m a steal her man!” The lines are punctuated with single-word ad-libs, like audible notebook-paper scribbles passed during class. In its music video, her lean frame twerks in a convertible, lounges with girlfriends in a Crayola-colorful backyard, flips hair long enough to dust the top of her booty shorts’ belt loops. She smiles to reveal a mouthful of braces. The song is a remix of a years-old Playboi Carti tune; Flo’s version has gained nearly 9 million views on YouTube—twice what his did in a quarter of the time.

“The beat is so alluring; it already is a

catchy little beat,” she says when I ask why she thinks her version popped in a way Carti’s couldn’t. (She clarifies that she’s a fan of his.) “With me, my voice is very unique. Adding my unique voice onto the catchy beat, it caught people’s attention, and they were just like, *Oh my gosh, who is this girl?*—type thing.” Part of the effect is her voice, its youthfulness and brevity. Megan Thee Stallion makes bodacious triple entendres; Doja Cat makes horny radio-ready hits. Flo Milli sounds like your overconfident little cousin. She was born and raised in Mobile, Alabama; early in high school, she and a friend promised each other they’d make it as a rap duo. Their live performances as Real and Beautiful, and later Pink Mafia, are still somewhere on YouTube. When she and the friend grew apart, she kept writing lyrics in binders or stepping out of math class to record voice memos of half-ideas on her phone in the bathroom. “I worked at Metro [PCS, the cell-phone retail store], and it had a speaker. I would blast beats and rap, and the people next door, it was like a tax company, they would snitch on me to my boss. Like, ‘This girl is rapping all day at work!’” A beat later, in her own defense, she adds, “But nobody would come into the store!”

Flo Milli approaches everything in her life with the same brash buoyancy as the opening of “Beef FloMix.” She’s newly single after having been in relationships for most of her adolescence, but she’s dexterous at getting a man to do what she wants. “When I was like 15, I used to be a player. Like I used to play the *hay-elle*”—she drags the word out, southern accent thick and vowels long—“out of a n----,” she says, laughing.

“I used to be thicc when I was younger,” she continues. “Like, around that time, I

was 160 pounds, I had a fat ass—everything, girl. I looked like I was 19 and 20 when I was really just 15 and 16. I would get a lot of guys trying to talk to me. All [older guys] want to do is just fuck. So let me just play y’all ass!” She wasn’t very interested in them, let alone what they wanted. She was just curious to see what the hustle could be. She had a Rolodex of admirers she kept at a distance. “It was really funny to me! But, you know—I forgot where I was going with that story. What was the question again?”

In middle school, she set out to become “IG famous.” “I used to have a tactic when I was in middle school. Little sneaky tactics to get followers,” she admits. She hems and haws about not wanting to tell me what they were but finally relents, explaining the ecosystem of high-school Instagram like it’s a science. “I made my page private, and I would follow a lot of people that have private pages, because they have to accept it,” she says. This means they also tend to send you a follow request back. Once she got the follow-for-follow, she’d wait a couple months and unfollow them in the middle of the night to keep her ratio enviable. “At like 3 a.m., when everybody was asleep, I would unfollow them and keep them in my requests and build it up.”

By 17, she’d amassed 20,000 followers. When she started working on “Beef FloMix,” she’d already graduated from high school, months early, but didn’t have a job yet. She was smoking and bored, playing around on YouTube, when she decided to play around with the song instead. She posted snippets of it on Instagram, and her fans begged her to record it properly. It stalled at 20,000 listens on SoundCloud when she uploaded it in October 2018. After fans used the song to soundtrack their own videos, it moved around Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. “Beef FloMix” didn’t technically chart, but it is considered the rare TikTok hit that’s as good heard in full as it is in short, viral bursts.

When it came on RCA’s radar, they called Flo in. The label was drawn to the then-teen’s wild confidence and how assured she was of her talent, said George Clark, the director of marketing/A&R. “She’s got the shit that everybody says I have,” says the rapper Rico Nasty, whom Flo Milli counts as a friend and role model. “[People say] ‘Rico, you have this personality.’ She has that shit.” “Weak” is the mixtape’s standout track, a song Rico says announces the debut of someone who will be in the industry for a long time. “[Flo is] making music, not fucking bops,” she continues, dismissing short-lived viral hits. “Beef FloMix” got her attention, but

“Weak” is the beginning of a body of work.

Ho, Why Is You Here? is an imperfect debut. You can hear the growing pains: Some songs rely too much on naïve brags Flo Milli doesn’t seem ready to commit to; others sound rushed and half finished, with beats she’s advanced beyond. But at least a few capitalize on what has positioned her as the first rapper to make it out of Mobile in a meaningful way or pop from TikTok alone. “Make a n---- blow a check on me/Save his number under ‘We gon’ see,’” she says on “Pussycat Doll.” Flo Milli makes music to party to, for women to feel themselves; she writes bars for memes and for songs that could script their own *Euphoria* needle drop. Maybe she likes it that way—her lyrics are inspired by her life and her own puckish self-assurance. “The standard or the stereotype that people try to put on dark-skinned women is so not real,” she says. “People automatically think I’m going to be insecure because I’m dark-skinned, and that’s not the case.” She makes music “to show people can be happy in their own skin.”

Flo Milli is young enough to describe her dreams in lofty generalities. She’s inspired by Minaj and wants to be a role model for another younger girl. “I would love to be doing shows, getting endorsements,” she says. “I want to eventually get into modeling. I want to be inside fashion shows. I want to be in movies when I get older. I want to be that person, a legendary artist.”

But she’s aware of the way the industry can chew up Black women and spit them out. The day she was signed felt bittersweet. “It was scary for me, coming up religious, hearing stuff about the industry,” she says. She grew up in the church, and when churchgoers would ask what her plans were with music, she wouldn’t share her big dreams. She still lives with her family, though no longer in Mobile, and she doesn’t have a raucous group chat of girlfriends to confide in. She keeps a close circle because she’s leery of clout-chasing friendships.

“I’m not going to lie—I barely have friends,” she says. “But I have one best friend that I talk to every day.” Her fans, though, are dedicated. When she wrote a since-deleted tweet saying, cryptically and alarmingly, that “if anything happens to me my ex did it,” they were loudly concerned. She’s at that honeymoon stage of fame: She feels every eye on her, and most of them are still supportive. When the mixtape drops, she has made plans to just chill with a cup of Hennessy or Don Julio (“I don’t know if those are the good ones, but that’s what I be drinking”) and her best friend. “We’re going to get *lit*,” she says. “We’re going to listen to that shit *all day*.” ■



Behind Taylor Swift’s Secret Summer Album (That Feels Like Fall)

FOLKLORE is out now.

AARON DESSNER CONFIRMS: *folklore* is Taylor Swift’s goth record. Or, at least, it’s her most gothic record. It’s also a spiritual companion to *his* 2019 album with the National, *I Am Easy to Find*. Below, liner notes from the instrumentalist who produced most of the album’s songs in secret over the past few months. (See our review, p. 66.) AS TOLD TO BRADY GERBER

“cardigan”

This is the first song we wrote. I sent Taylor a folder of stuff I had done that I was really excited about recently—“cardigan” was one of those sketches; it was originally called “maple.” **It harks back to experiences in your youth—this sense of longing and sadness.** But, ultimately, it’s cathartic. It was a perfect match for how her voice feels. We both realized this was a lightning rod for the rest of the record.

“the last great american dynasty”

This was an attempt to write something more up-tempo. I was interested in this *In Rainbows*-style latticework of electric guitars—they come in and pull you along. I was imagining these dreamlike, distant electric guitars and electronics but with an element of folk. **I sent it before I went on a run, and when I got back, the song was there. Songs would come out of Taylor like a lightning bolt.** The lyrics recount the narrative of Rebekah Harkness. She was married to the heir of the Standard Oil fortune, and they bought this house in Rhode Island

up on a cliff. It’s the story of this woman and the outrageous parties she threw. She was infamous for not fitting in entirely in society; that story, at the end, becomes personal. Eventually, Taylor bought that house.

“seven”

This is the second song we wrote. **It’s looking back at childhood feelings, recounting memories and memorializing them.** It has one of the most important lines on the record: “And just like a folk song, our love will be passed on.” That’s what this album is doing. It’s memorializing love, childhood, and memories. It’s a folkloric way of processing.

“august”

This is maybe the closest thing to a pop song. **It gets loud.** It has this shimmering summer haze to it. Coming out of “seven,” where you have this image of her on a swing and she’s 7 years old, “august” feels like fast-forwarding to now. It’s a breezy, intoxicating feeling.

“epiphany”

Taylor had this idea of a beautiful drone and a very cinematic, wide-screen song, where it’s like a sea to bathe in. I made this

crazy drone, which starts the song, and it’s there the whole time. **Lots of different instruments are played, then slowed down and reversed.** It created this giant stack of harmony that was hard to manage, sonically, but it was beautiful to get lost in. She heard it, and instantly this song came to her, which is partially the story of her grandfather, who was a soldier, and partially a story about a nurse in modern times.

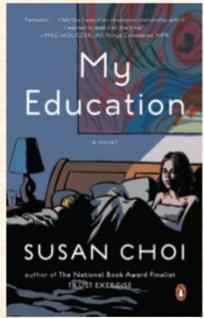
“betty”

This is the one where Taylor wanted a reference. **She wanted it to have an early Bob Dylan, sort of a Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan feel.** We pushed it a little more toward *John Wesley Harding*, since it has some drums. It’s this epic narrative folk song where it tells us a long story, and it starts to connect the dots back to “cardigan.”

“hoax”

If you leave me in a room with a piano, I might play something like this. After writing all these songs, this one felt the rawest. There’s sadness, but it’s a kind of hopeful sadness. **It’s a recognition that you take on the burden of your partners, your loved ones, and their ups and downs.**

Best Sex I Ever Read: Raven Leilani on



I would have liked a single rope to bind us together, **mummy** within which our two bodies got mashed she could undo my jeans, and peel them off with seized me by the armpits and heaved me away **pinned me flat with the heel of her hand** so that she could, face in my cunt. I seemed to come right away, with a hard, an uppermost froth; but beneath, magma still heaved and now, my orgasms had been deep and ponderous things; finally did, so that in their wake I felt voided and calm, every work with benign noninterest. Never had there been this and yet she seemed to recognize just what had happened, so She made me come so many times that afternoon that had **I been a doll, she might have twisted off each of my limbs,** tongue into each of the holes. Certainly had the windows day, my thundering cries, in the end, would have summoned voice out of me I did not know I owned; the devastation ocean-floor tremor, while that voice I had never imagined was

FOR HER DEBUT novel, *Luster*, Raven Leilani wanted to write a Black woman who was “pure id.” Her protagonist, Edie, a 23-year-old art-school dropout who is fired from her publishing gig for having sex on the job, thirsts after an older white man she meets online—not despite the power differential between them but because of it. The sex scenes Leilani crafts are violent, debasing, and fluid, the engine of the book’s plot and of Edie’s eventual self-revelation. For those scenes and the novel itself, she found inspiration in Susan Choi’s *My Education*. AS TOLD TO LILA SHAPIRO

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LUSTER will be published August 4 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

“THE KIND OF book I’m looking for tends to have obsession at its core. When we begin *My Education*, we’re introduced to the protagonist Regina’s desire through the figure of her professor, this problematic and seductive person she becomes enamored with. That’s where we start. Where we end is with the professor’s wife, Martha. My book basically does the same thing. There’s something deeply off limits about that arrangement—a subversion of the reader’s expectation.

There’s not quite a hundred pages before you get to this

passage. Choi is so precise in how she choreographs the buildup. As Regina meets the professor and starts to fall under his spell, every now and then there’s an interaction with Martha. There’s a silent recognition but also a real barrier to their communication. I often frame the erotic in terms of denial. On the craft level, there’s a beautiful delaying of gratification, which is so important to good sex writing.

There’s violence all throughout this passage—the sex is a torment, a hail of hot stones. There’s a speed and a weight and a real physicality

## the Ecstatic, Violent Joy of Susan Choi's *My Education*

with tightly stacked coils, so that we formed a sort of Siamese into one—and having fought me to half an arm's length so a hard downward step of her deft pointed foot, she simply from her onto the bed, and as **I struggled to regain her kiss** when I gave up the struggle, with a leisurely sigh sink her popping effervescence, as if her mouth had raised **blisters**, or groaned and was yearning to fling itself into the air. Until slow to yield to excavation; self-annihilating when they yen neutralized, and gazed on whoever had managed the tormenting, self-heightening pleasure, **like a hail of hot stones**, that before I had even stopped keening she bore down again. I been somewhat older, I might have dropped dead. **Had** and sucked the knobs until they glistened, and drilled her been open, as would have made sense on that sunny June the neighbors; for Martha, in dismantling me, dredged a of my pleasure surged outward and outward again, like an bellowing harshly Oh GOD, Oh GOD, OHGODOHGOD!

to it. Not just the word choice but how it's arranged. There's a speed to the rhythm of the sentences that intensifies the violence. It's not just the image of drowning, the idea of being totally out of control, but the way those images are pressed right up against survival. It works partly because a more traditional way to talk about two women coming together is for the language to be soft, maybe even maternal.

When I write sex, I refuse to pan away to the curtains. It is important to me to show, as Susan Choi does here, the moments that are,

traditionally at least, unsexy. The blisters. The mummy—that's a death image. But part of great sex writing is the inclination to talk about the blisters and the mummy.

There's a beautiful use of hyperbole throughout. There's florid academic language, and there's also the really frank language of "her face in my cunt." That's a beautiful whiplash. Like, *She's going all caps!* I love that commitment.

I'm drawn to the ecstasy of emptiness, of being emptied and exhausted and dissected and torn apart—Regina as a doll, Martha sucking

the joints. The imagery of emptiness and the imagery of being made new. There's a clear power dynamic here, and it's unbalanced; in *Luster*, I tried to write toward that imbalance too.

In starting to talk about my book, I've found it challenging to articulate the dynamics of my protagonist Edie's desires. I think this is because of Edie's identity—there's something more fraught about what it means, as a Black woman, to invite a subjugation. It's so tricky to talk about because there's a fair conversation to be had about what it means to

inflict violence into the body of a Black woman. Because we do live in a culture that is indifferent, specifically, to Black women's pain and their softness. But if I'm honest, when I'm actually writing, I'm not thinking about the political ramifications of what I'm writing. I'm thinking about what feels good and what feels true. More than anything, when I sat down to write, I wanted to write a Black woman being led around by id. I haven't found many portrayals of Black women like that in literature. I wanted to see the freedom of that on the page.

# Amy Seimetz's Mirror Worlds

In her new absurdist thriller, *She Dies Tomorrow*, the director-actress dares to think the unthinkable.

By Matt Zoller Seitz

*SHE DIES TOMORROW* is available on demand on August 7.

**A**MY SEIMETZ IS laughing. The laughter is always triggered by things one might not normally laugh about, from the ravages of illness to the catastrophes of the pandemic. It ranges from a wry chuckle to a full-on roar, her head thrown back. This happens countless times as we talk about *She Dies Tomorrow*, the 38-year-old director-actress's third feature. The movie is about a woman named Amy (Kate Lyn Sheil) who has a breakdown over the prospect of her impending death. At least it seems impending: It's never explained why, exactly, Amy is convinced she'll be gone before the next sunset. We just observe her as she melts down in her house (which also happens to be Seimetz's home in the Mount Washington neighborhood of Los Angeles). Then, over the course of the next few hours, she transmits her fear of oblivion to others, including her friend (Jane Adams), her caring but exasperated brother (Chris Messina), and his self-centered wife (Katie Aselton), who is having a birthday party and berates Amy for being a bummer.

"Death is the cruelest joke, you know?," Seimetz tells me from her living room. That the set of *She Dies Tomorrow* serves as the backdrop to our conversation adds one more plane to the hall of mirrors. "You're born, you're conscious, and, the entire time, the trick is to deny the inevitable."

Death and grief are adjacent to a lot of art when they aren't at the center. But it's still striking to look at Seimetz's filmography as both performer and filmmaker and realize how many of her projects have dealt with death, either as an abstract concept or head-on, via genre. Last year, she starred in the remake of *Pet Sema-*

*tary*, about a family that discovers it can bring the dead back to life with monstrous results. In 2017, she was a member of the ensemble cast of *Alien: Covenant*, the latest entry in science fiction's indestructible franchise about violation, gestation, extinction, and rebirth. In 2013, she starred as the mother of a murdered teenage girl in AMC's *The Killing*. Two years before that, she co-starred in Adam Wingard's indie slasher flick *You're Next*.

You could even say death was the inspiration for her award-winning 2012 feature, *Sun Don't Shine*, a microbudget effort that got a modest release but wound up as a critics' darling. The film follows a desperately unhappy couple (Sheil and Kentucker Audley) traveling through a swampy landscape (Florida, Seimetz's native state) that becomes more menacing by the scene; in the trunk of their car, we learn, is the body of her murdered husband. The film opens with the couple embroiled in what appears to be a fight to the death, grappling on swampy ground, literally getting down in the muck. The scene embodies Seimetz's earthy, blunt approach to filmmaking, although—in collaboration with another trusted creative partner, her regular cinematographer, Jay Keitel—the visuals are also spectacular and intuitive, shifting with the emotions of their heroine from mundane to nightmarish and back.

Both *Sun Don't Shine* and *She Dies Tomorrow* are notable for what they *don't* reveal to the viewer, letting mood, performance, and striking imagery do the work of carrying us along elliptical narratives that might have, in other hands, leaned more heavily into genre. *She Dies Tomorrow* plays like a slasher picture or a pod-people movie in which the audience is

denied a glimpse of the threat all the way to the end. Instead, we see Amy both close up and from a distance as the character wanders her house crying and babbling and leaning against a living-room wall, touching it as if it's hot. But after a while, a funny or maybe not funny thing happens: *She Dies Tomorrow* morphs into a pitch-black absurdist comedy as each new character becomes infected by Amy's fear of death after coming into contact with her. The film's deft handoff of dread inspired critics to peg it as a "pandemic movie" when it premiered at this year's South by Southwest—online, of course, as the festival had been shut down at the last minute so it wouldn't become an epicenter of plague. But to Seimetz, it's a semi-autobiographical exploration of feelings that she suppresses every day, whether or not external factors like a pandemic or the loss of a loved one happen to amplify it.

"When I drive on a really high bridge, the thing that's going through my brain is, *Don't drive off the edge, don't drive off the edge*," she says, chuckling. "Freud's theory was that insanity, schizophrenia, and bipolar are [the conditions] of somebody who cannot deny death. And society, in order to function, needs to have denial of death because it's paralyzing. In order to make progress and to think about future generations, you have to deny that you're going to die."

SEIMETZ SAYS SHE named the protagonist of *She Dies Tomorrow* Amy because it seemed ridiculous to pretend the character wasn't herself. "I thought, *Let's just get rid of the artifice*." At the heart of the film lies Seimetz's experience from 11 years ago, when she put her career on hold to return to the Tampa-St. Petersburg area, where she grew up, to care for her father, who'd had several strokes and was in decline. "It's like if you see this giant house in the distance and all the lights are on and then you're watching one light from each room go off over the period of like three years," she says.

Seimetz started making films during a semester spent at NYU. She graduated from Florida State University, where she majored in literature and art history and acted in student shorts, making friends who would go on to be important in the film industry, including *Moonlight* producer Adele Romanski and writer-director Barry Jenkins, whom Seimetz met in the student union's darkroom. When she moved to Los Angeles a year later, she had no intention of pursuing



*Amy Seimetz and her lead actress, Kate Lyn Sheil, superimposed.*

acting professionally, but she started performing in her own filmmaking efforts and accumulated dozens of acting credits before she directed *Sun Don't Shine*.

The combination of *Sun Don't Shine* and 2013's *Upstream Color* helped establish Seimetz as a kind of ultra-indie icon. The latter is a meditation on mortality and rebirth in which she starred opposite her then-boyfriend, the director and actor Shane Carruth. They were together on and off over six years. Recently, it surfaced that she now has a restraining order against Carruth because of repeated instances of domestic violence and harassment. When asked about the relationship, she says, understandably, "That's a no comment."

The next project she worked on as a filmmaker, the Starz drama *The Girlfriend Experience*, concerns the sort of paranoia that stems from being stalked by a tormentor. The show was produced and overseen by Steven Soderbergh and starred Riley Keough as a call girl who becomes increasingly paranoid after an anonymous individual starts trying to blackmail her.

Seimetz co-wrote and co-directed *The Girlfriend Experience*, a loose adaptation of Soderbergh's 2009 semi-improvised indie film. She also played a supporting role as the heroine's sister, cast her close friend Sheil in a key part, and convinced Soderbergh to hire Keitel as cinematographer on seven episodes. In what Soderbergh variously calls "a filmmaking experiment" and "a shotgun wedding," Seimetz was paired with veteran independent filmmaker Lodge Kerrigan (*Clean, Shaven*), who is known for his terrifying explorations of disordered minds. They had to write the entire first season together and alternate directing duties.

The second season gave Seimetz and Kerrigan their own seven-episode miniseries, also dealing with sexuality, psychology, and fear of harm and death. Her old FSU classmate Romanski executive-produced. She and Seimetz first met at an FSU party, where they asked a friend to wander around with a disposable camera and take pictures while they photo-bombed in the background. "Amy's brain is firing on so many cylinders that when she finally has the chance to stand on a set like the one on *The Girlfriend Experience*, the world is finally matching her interiority," Romanski says.

Soderbergh, also a multi-hyphenate filmmaker, saw a version of himself in Seimetz but with a distinctive personality he wanted to encourage and reward. "I was struck by her presence on-camera," he says. "She's really arresting to look at, and she's got a unique energy and seems inca-

pable of doing something unbelievable. Then I find out she's this gifted filmmaker in her own right. I haven't found anything yet that she doesn't do well. She's a good writer, she's a terrific director, she's got a really good instinct for casting, and she knows what to do with a camera."

That last quality impressed Soderbergh most: Seimetz never made the obvious choice for the show, always erring on the side of letting the audience intuit deeper meanings; it was clear from the way she wrote, staged, and shot a moment that there was more going on than people having conversations or sex in sleek hotel rooms. As an example, Soderbergh cites one scene, in which a john's distraught wife meets the heroine, Christine Reade, in a bar and warns her to stay away from her husband, pouring on the resentment, threats of ruination, and intimations of violence. Christine absorbs it all, a poker-faced immovable object, but after the wife leaves, her hand shakes slightly as she picks up her drink and then sets it down. The episode ends by cutting to black on the *clink* sound of the glass touching the tabletop. "I saw that and thought, *What an interesting way to show that she doesn't really have it together*," Soderbergh says.

Such choices involve figuring out how to talk about things while talking around them, which helps when you specialize in making films about death. This happens to be the narrative strategy for both of Seimetz's films as writer-director—especially *She Dies Tomorrow*, which encourages the viewer to speculate on whether there is an actual threat against the characters or they simply pass the protagonist's depression and paranoia around until they are all consumed by it.

This is Seimetz's favorite way to communicate information onscreen. When offered a hypothetical scenario in which a financially strapped woman visits an ex and steals money from his wallet while he's in the bathroom, she says she'd probably shoot the scene so the viewer has no idea whether the woman stole the money until the next scene, or maybe later. "Lodge and I used to talk about this," she says. "Exposition becomes catnip for the audience." But when a filmmaker or performer delivers information through actions and expressions, the audience has to "pay attention, because we're not going to feed it all to you verbally. You just have to go with us."

Or, as Barry Jenkins puts it, "When you watch an Amy Seimetz film, you never know what she's gonna do next. And you never know when the end is gonna come." ■



## Beyoncé Master Class What the artist tells us without saying a word.

By Angelica Jade Bastién

BLACK IS KING is out  
July 31 on Disney+.

IN 2011, Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter severed professional ties with her father and former manager, Mathew Knowles, who'd had a strong hand in controlling her image. In the nine years since, she has evolved her public presentation frequently and dramatically—more so, probably, than any other figure, culturally or otherwise. And for the most part, she has avoided talking about it, letting the images do the work.

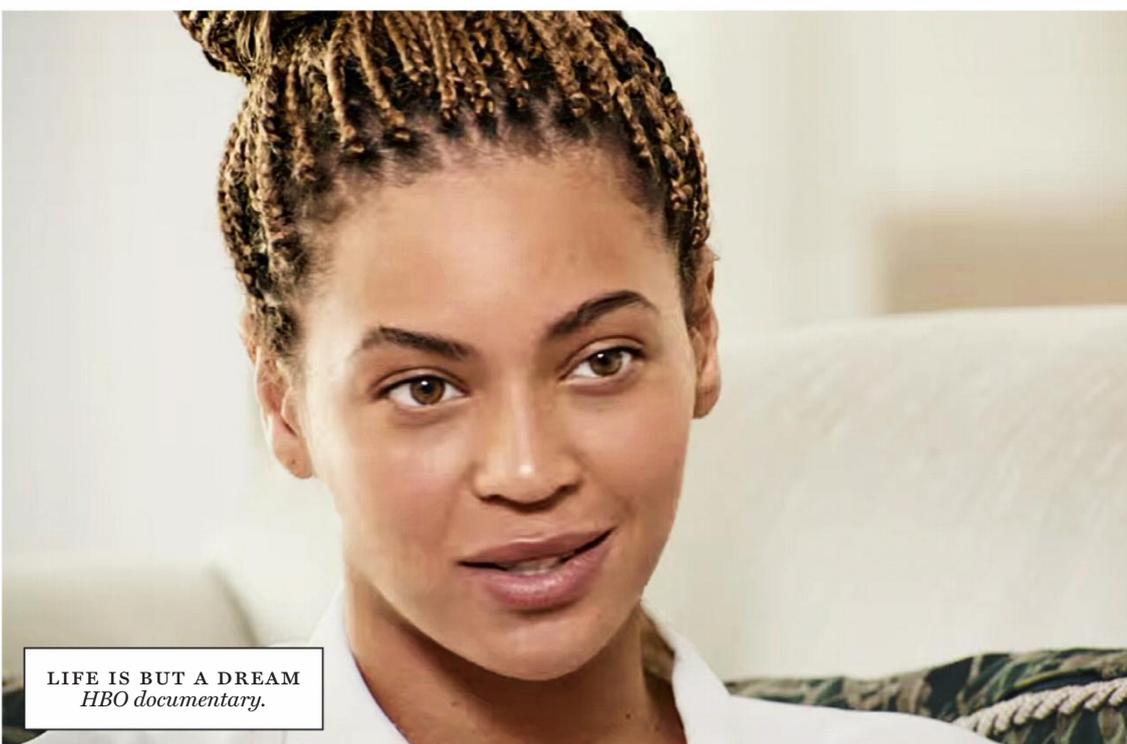
## 2011: Mother

Beyoncé's performance here is incandescent and high energy in the ways we've come to expect from her. The lasting image arrives at the end of the show: The singing is over, the backup dancers are cast in shadow, and Beyoncé is in the spotlight. She drops her mic, unbuttons her glittering purple blazer, and rubs her pregnant belly, signaling to the world

the next stage in her life. This moment marked a turning point in how Beyoncé chose to incorporate her family life into her art, which has in recent years been undergirded by her interest in creating a lasting legacy. This was the first time she presented the public with the image that has come to define her career: a **gleaming, aspirational snapshot of a Black family.**



"LOVE ON TOP"  
MTV Video Music Awards performance.



LIFE IS BUT A DREAM  
HBO documentary.

## 2013: Reluctant Speaker

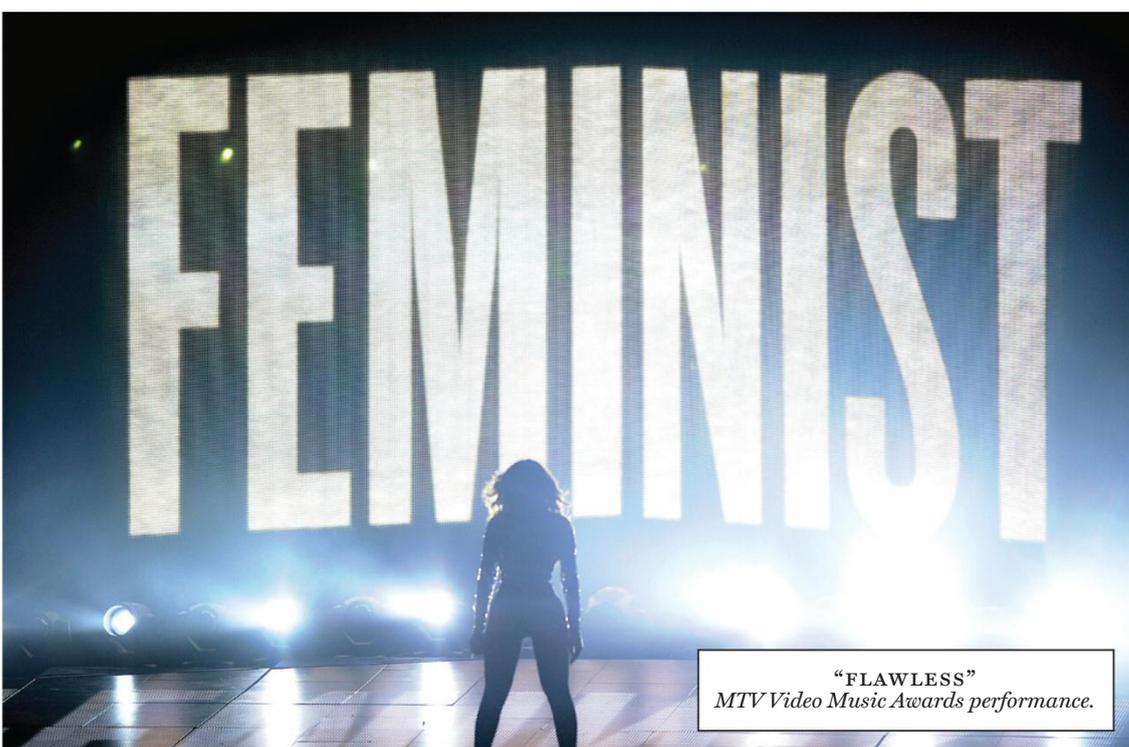
This documentary is an intriguing failure in the artist's career. The image of a stripped-down Beyoncé speaking from a couch to an on-camera interviewer speaks most profoundly to what she struggles to communicate: intimacy. *Life Is But a Dream* has a veneer of vulnerability as Beyoncé discusses her marriage—and even the rumors that she had a surrogate for her

first pregnancy. But instead of revealing much about the star, the film suggests she doesn't have much that's meaningful to say. In many ways, **the best thing Beyoncé did for her career was to stop doing traditional interviews** and let her art speak for her. This allows audiences to project a depth onto her work that wouldn't otherwise exist in the same way.

## 2014: Political Leader

In a widely circulated image, Beyoncé stands in silhouette against the word FEMINIST. Before this moment, Beyoncé's relationship to feminism fit into the simplistic sort of girl power that was a vestige of the 1990s. In the years since, **the idea of feminism has proved useful for Beyoncé, allowing her to seem like a richly political figure.** In her *Life Is But a Dream* doc, she notes, "It really pisses me off that

women don't get the same opportunities as men do. Or money for that matter because let's face it, money gives men the power to run the show." That was the extent of what we knew about Beyoncé's feminism: capitalist-minded and a touch conservative in its possibilities. With this performance, the blandest language of the movement was enough to refashion her image as a bold political thinker.

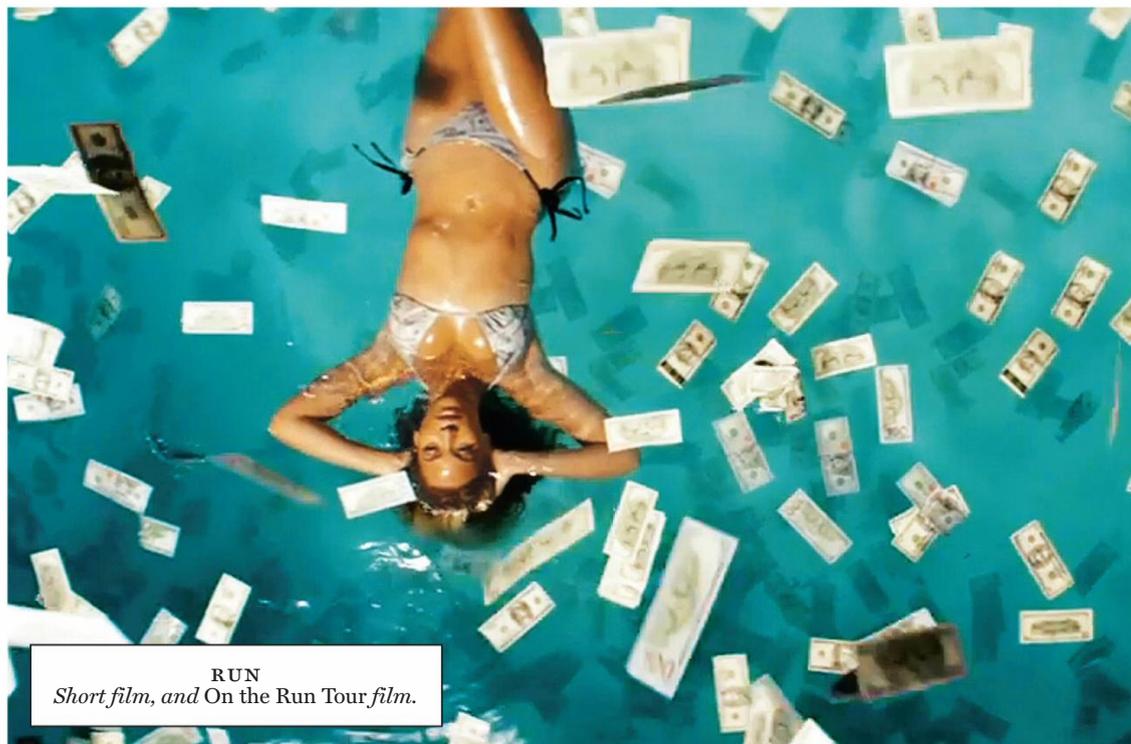


"FLAWLESS"  
MTV Video Music Awards performance.

## 2014: Capitalist

Beyoncé floats in a pool, surrounded by \$100 bills. It's an image of exorbitant wealth and power. It is also paired with moments of intimacy between Beyoncé and Jay-Z in the *On the Run Tour* film. The aesthetics evoke *Bonnie and Clyde*, communicating an "us against the world" dynamic that aims to show they've traveled through the fire (the tour started not long after the infamous Met

Gala elevator incident between Jay-Z and Solange went public) and come out the other side stronger. Both *Run* and the tour film are windows into how Beyoncé wants people to view her marriage: **wealthy, powerful, united**. But the images she chooses to share often have the opposite effect, highlighting the ways this couple seems to be more like a meeting of two brands than a loving relationship.



RUN  
Short film, and *On the Run Tour* film.



LEMONADE  
Visual album.

## 2016: Representational Force

Beyoncé gathers a group of Black women to the moss-covered groves of a southern estate. Sitting alongside the diva on the porch steps are Amandla Stenberg, Zendaya, and the musical groups Ibeyi and Chloe x Halle. It's a touching moment, even glorious, to witness. When *Lemonade* was released, it was hailed as a revolutionary work of Black feminism, further establishing Beyoncé as a political figure.

But the most striking thing about this image is its representational power. Because the world is so starved for deeper portrayals of Black women, many of Beyoncé's lasting images have been significant because of who they show. **They become surfaces onto which we graft ideas**, potent not for what Beyoncé is saying but for what our projections upon her work say about us as an audience.

## 2016: Cautious Revolutionary

The most enduring image in "Formation" features Beyoncé on top of a cop car as it slides into the surrounding water. This moment bristles with a radical agenda that calls out the problems with the U.S. police state. The video got blowback in certain circles for being "anti-police." Beyoncé responded in a highly controlled interview with *Elle*: "Anyone who perceives my message as anti-

police is completely mistaken. I have so much admiration and respect for officers and the families of officers who sacrifice themselves to keep us safe. But let's be clear: I am against police brutality and injustice. Those are two separate things." **There's a sense she's hedging her bets** and inadvertently undercutting the song's revolutionary value. No matter. The image is what we associate with her politics.

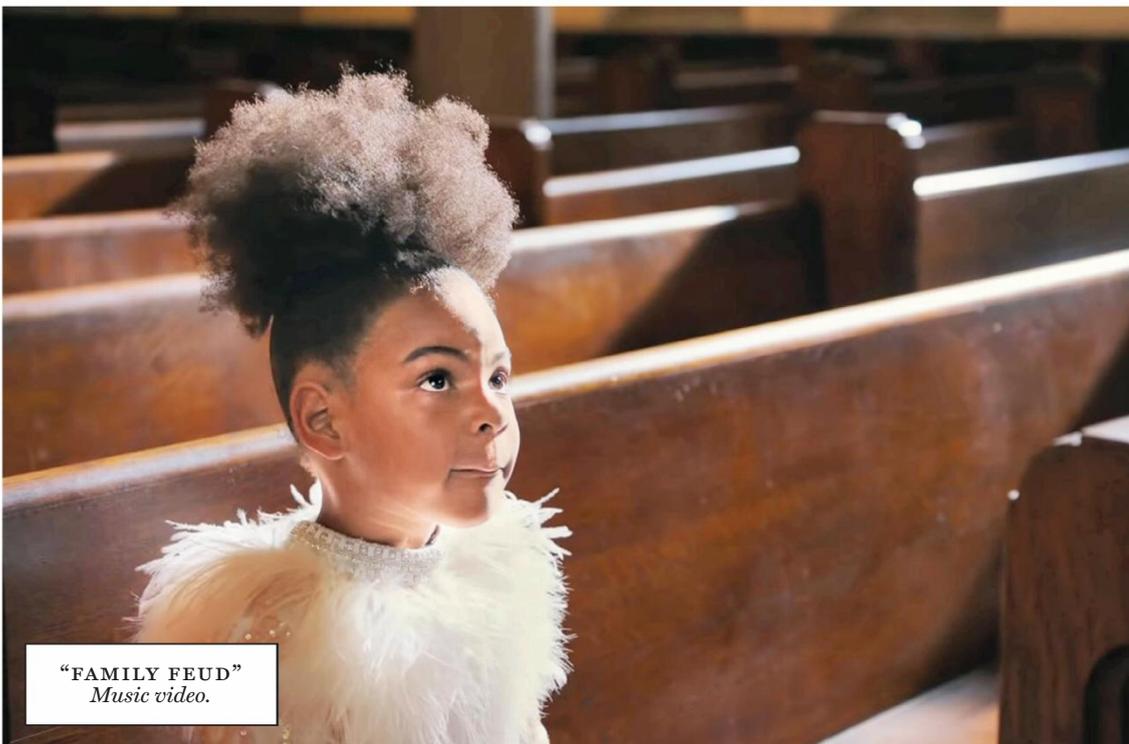
"FORMATION"  
Music video.



**2017:  
Matriarch**

Over the years, Beyoncé has increasingly centered her family in her work. In February 2017, she posted a photo of herself on Instagram, surrounded by lush flowers, to announce her pregnancy with twins. It spoke to the ways she has used her family to evolve her star image—**framing herself as a divine mother and the head of a dynasty.** That latter point is

evident in videos like the one for Jay-Z’s “Family Feud,” which tells a futuristic story about a great familial line that it suggests is composed of Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s offspring—including an older Blue Ivy as an important “founding mother” who has a hand in revising the Constitution in 2050. It’s a doozy, but what’s important is how these images return to the idea of a powerful lineage in the making.



“FAMILY FEUD”  
Music video.

“LOVE DROUGHT” AND “SANDCASTLES”  
Grammy Awards performance.



**2017:  
Goddess**

At the Grammys, Beyoncé performed in golden regalia as video projections displayed three generations of Knowles women: her mother, Tina; her daughter, Blue Ivy; and herself. These images of women with halos crowning their heads speak to Beyoncé’s interest in matriarchal lineage. **The use of yellow and gold has been noted as a reference**

**to the Yoruba goddess Oshun, while the crown atop Beyoncé’s head echoes the Virgin Mary’s.** This is an early example of the star pushing her brand in a new direction by incorporating imagery that equates Africa with nobility. By coupling African imagery with that her family, Beyoncé positions her lineage as royal.

**2020:  
Royalty**

“You can’t wear a crown with your head down,” a voice intones in the trailer for *Black Is King*, which furthers Beyoncé’s partnership with Disney after her role in the 2019 *The Lion King* remake. Her recent work gestures to the idea that, before slavery, Black men and women were African kings and queens who were stripped not only of their culture but their nobility. Visuals in *Black Is King* highlight this complicated truth:

Beyoncé dressed in a bejeweled aqua outfit with matching African headgear, surrounded by Black men in the ecstasy of dance. The imagery she has gravitated toward of late suggests **this is her microview of what reparations look like: reclaiming an idealized past for Black Americans.** It’s a conservative framing of Blackness, in which wealth, prestige, and power are tantamount to worth.



“ALREADY”  
Music video from *Black Is King*.

SEASON 6, EPISODE 22  
"The Diplomat's Club"



SEASON 4, EPISODE 12  
"The Airport"



# A Word on *Seinfeld*

The things you notice when you  
rewatch, rather than cancel, old sitcoms.

By Lauren Michele Jackson

**W**HITE SITCOMS HAVE of late united, disavowing the misbegotten race play of television's recent past. Contrary to prior negligence, shows such as *Scrubs* and *30 Rock* have pulled episodes featuring blackface from streaming platforms as a way of making amends. Even episodes like *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia's* "Dee Reynolds: Shaping America's Youth," which cracks wise about the absurdities of racial performance, got the ax. I was something akin to relieved upon my *Seinfeld* rewatch to find Michael Richards's scorched visage, grinning like Sambo, still intact on the episode "The Wife."

Exorcisms are boring these days—that is, exorcisms of a PR sort, which give the impression that race arrives only when we perceive it and evaporates with every redacted slur. After all, the American sitcom, like so many national institutions, has an earned reputation for segregation. There are the vaunted Black classics and then there are the shows that are containers for white stories, which present an urbanscape—usually New York City—whose multiculturalism goes unseen.

But Black people have never been nonexistent, or invisible, in the white sitcom.

They have been invisible only in the way that Black people who service the margins of white world-making must be. In a genre whose conventions (and hilarity) thrive on white ridiculousness, Black people, relegated to the smallest of parts, exist to rein in the free play of whites, reminding viewers how safely deviant the main cast can be. No show exhibits this effect as quietly as the one that crested in lockstep with the '90s culture wars, the quintessential sitcom and, in one woman's opinion, the greatest—*Seinfeld*.

I speak of certain characters often deprived of a name: The Florist (Lionel Mark Smith in "The Gum"); the Agency Rep (Victoria Dillard, "The Old Man"); the Orderly, who bars George from his fiancée's cousin's delivery room (Charles Emmett, "The Seven"). There are the two Walters—Walter (Wayne Wilderson) and Other Walter (Mark Daniel Cade)—who saddle Elaine with too much cake ("The Frogger"); the co-producer of *Scarsdale Surprise* (Tucker Smallwood), who arrives with a threat to take Kramer's Tony away ("The Summer of George"); all the people George stalks, desperate for a friend to call "Black" ("The Diplomat's Club"), some of them with names, such as Joe (Robert Hooks) and Remy (Diana Theodore), a father and daughter

who've already made the mistake of letting this nebbish into their lives and onto their now-juice-stained couch ("The Couch").

Black people on *Seinfeld* play a very particular role, defining the social edges of "very," or too much. A thankless job, to be sure. There's no glory in it or, it seems, much fun. I am charmed, though. They foil the Black bestie type, the sidekick destined to enliven a white protagonist's script and social life with idioms and shade. All the bombast, wackiness, and camp belong in the domain of the four protagonists—Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer, plus a rotating circle of co-conspirators. The conceit of *Seinfeld* resides in its middle-class sympathies; its normcore aesthetic invites the assumption that its characters are conventional, living and moving about in a world held together by the titular character's observational joke style. In truth, the group is selfish and deranged, delicious micromenaces to normalcy and etiquette who nonetheless enter and leave each episode with their worlds intact. When white characters run wild on *Seinfeld*, Black people are cops. They exist as agents of public decency next to whom our main characters appear all the more indecent.

Consider "The Diplomat's Club," in which George compels Mr. Morgan (Tom Wright) to take a Polaroid with him—a naked attempt to brownnose his Black boss and preempt an impending staff reorganization in the Yankees front office. Shouldering up next to the unenthused supervisor, George tells Mr. Morgan he resembles the boxer Sugar Ray Leonard. "Yeah, you must hear that all the time," George adds, grinning and missing Mr. Morgan's quiet stupefaction. "I suppose we all look alike to you. Right, Costanza?" he responds, giving a neutral half-smile in time for the flash of the camera, while George flounders in the wake of

SEASON 8, EPISODE 9  
"The Abstinence"

From left: George's boss, Mr. Morgan, stunned by his employee's daftness; Elaine throws a tantrum when a Black flight attendant prevents her from sneaking into first class; Jackie Chiles is the exception that proves the rule—a Black character who is just as comical as the whites.

his faux pas. He looks for solidarity among his colleagues—all white—who file out of the room on cue. As many plots with Mr. Morgan demonstrate, George is unfit for work, unfit, therefore, for adulthood, and unfit for life.

Like plain white walls in a room full of rubber balls, these Black figures are ready and waiting to absorb and repel the zany energies of characters we care about. In "The Alternate Side," George fills in for Sid (Jay Brooks), whose car-parking gig literally crashes and burns under George's control. "Moving cars from one side of the street to the other don't take no more sense than puttin' on a pair of pants," Sid tells George upon his return. "My question to you is, Who's putting your pants on?" In "The Airport," Elaine slips into first class from coach and stumbles into an open window seat. Caught out of turn by the composed Black flight attendant with a French twist, she pleads and bargains and pouts and shouts—Julia Louis-Dreyfus cycling through more facial expressions than I can count, as physically comic in face as in body. The stewardess sends her back whence she came, gently rolling her eyes while Elaine jerks the dividing curtain to and fro.

Those frustrated with the sweeping whiteness of shows that presuppose a New York City state of mind—from the mundane (*How I Met Your Mother*) to the iconic (*Girls*)—must grant that they are not unlike the way white residents, transplants or not, experience the city, moving alongside and in between darker people whose lives are not worth their curiosity. Black characters play a significant role precisely because they are true strangers—estranged by city planning and the color line—for these main casts to bump up against.

This feature—or bug—of America's sitcoms complements another brainchild of

broadcast media: the crime procedural. Within the recent waves of redress regarding what has been shown on TV, actors and viewers are revisiting "copaganda," mass culture's long-standing infatuation with avatars of justice. "TV has long had a police's-eye perspective," Kathryn VanArendonk wrote in *Vulture* in June. "Order, a police-imposed status quo, is good; disruption is bad." But in the crime television we call meaty and good—*Justified*, *True Detective*, *Mindhunter*—white people are so synonymous with order that their chaos is justified. In stories in this vein, Black authority—the Black mayors and Black principals and Black police chiefs—appears backward, playing by the rules to the detriment of what's important, or at least intriguing. The second season of *Big Little Lies* is haunted, for example, by Merrin Dungey's Adrienne Quinlan, the principal detective chasing the murderer of an abuser. We observe her parallel in another Black character, Bonnie (Zoë Kravitz), whose goody two-shoes affect is overwhelmed by her co-stars' capriciousness.

The sitcom takes itself much less seriously than that. The highs are higher, and the stakes are lower. *Seinfeld* is never absent stereotypes, not with its penchant for ethnified characters. But here, only the cherished have the privilege of genuine buffoonery. Disruption is good. Scenes are engineered to be stolen by the over-the-top white in the room, to whom the scene always belonged in the first place.

There are notable reversals: Rebecca DeMornay, the charity representative played by Sonya Eddy, whose vacillating delivery commandeers the comedy whenever she appears. In "The Muffin Tops," she lambastes the philanthropic aim of Elaine and Mr. Lippman's tops-only muffin bakery, calling the remainders they'd donated to a

homeless shelter "just stumps." In a later episode, when George seeks to recoup the cost of an art book he never wanted, Ms. DeMornay is there, advising he remove himself and his "toilet book," acid in tone. Her unruly performance is magnetic.

The show's most audacious Black presence materializes in the character of Jackie Chiles (Phil Morris). Jackie gets his start in "The Maestro" as the can't-lose lawyer in pursuit of a settlement over the latte that burned Kramer in the previous episode. In their initial meeting, Kramer's patented jitters are somewhat subdued; he is cautious, contrite even, in the face of Jackie's staccato timing. The oddness of their coupledness persists throughout the series. Kramer thwarts his lawyer at every turn, yet Jackie earns the laughter, as unhinged as the capital-*W* Wackiest character in the cast. They team up in "The Abstinence" against the tobacco companies after Kramer's in-unit smoking lounge wreaks havoc on his face—"Jackie's cashing in on your wretched disfigurement," Jackie says with glee.

In "The Finale," an undisguised clip show, past encounters parade into the courtroom with all the subtlety of a final act. Represented by Chiles, naturally, the four leads are on trial for violating a rural county's "Good Samaritan" law. The prosecution (interracial co-counselors) calls "character witnesses" to establish a "pattern of antisocial behavior that's been going on for years." The quartet is convicted; the show could end no other way—just deserts for the delinquents. Yet this is no crime procedural, and the show is not over. Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer stroll to their cell, and their bit resumes. "We'll be out in a year and then we'll be back," Jerry says, shrugging. Conversation picks up. Consequences fall away. It is just the four—white and unfazed. ■

The CULTURE PAGES

## CRITICS

Craig Jenkins on folklore ... Molly Young on Intimations ... Jen Chaney on In My Skin.



Taylor Swift

POP / CRAIG JENKINS

## Taylor Goes Minimalist

For the pop diva,  
*folklore* is uncharted territory.

ALMOST A YEAR AGO, Taylor Swift released *Lover*, a lively course correction intended, in part, to craft a more measured and mature style for the singer, whose previous album, *reputation*, had used withering sarcasm and hip-hop production elements to wage war with Swift's crumbling goody-two-shoes image and the enemies poking holes in the narrative. In the January Netflix documentary *Miss Americana*, which chronicled the *Lover* sessions and revisited key career moves in the preceding decade, Swift admitted to being driven, on a certain level, by a hunger for public approval: "My entire moral code is a need to be thought of as good," she said. 1989's pop turn was really a quest to be seen as the total package in music, an overcorrection for the embarrassment at the 2009 MTV VMAs. The country era before that had been a bit of an act of folksy people-pleasing too. *Lover*, it seemed, was the real deal. But even that was a charm offensive of a sort, heralded by blindingly bright music videos and bustling, busy melodies.

Amid the R&B-soul underpinnings of "False God" and "I Forgot That You Existed," the droning synths of "The Archer," the high-school melodrama of "Miss Americana & the Heartbreak Prince," the maximalist pop-radio fare of "Me!" and "You Need to Calm Down," and the rustic repose of "Soon You'll Get Better" and the title track, half a dozen

FOLKLORE  
TAYLOR SWIFT.  
UNIVERSAL.

possible Taylors emerged from the pyre on which the old Taylor burned. Again, Swift created distance between her past and present by arming herself with different toys. You could argue that the singer's eighth album, *folklore*, announced and released in a whirlwind 24 hours on a Friday in late July, is another sweeping recalibration, trading soaring melodies and effervescent production for moody, introspective folk-pop. But it undersells the true utility of this stripped affair to say it's just a new sandbox for Taylor. What's striking about this collection of songs is the relative lack of a fussy new sound and a clear single. Loosed from the responsibility of piquing the audience's interest with a rollout dotted with attention-grabbing gestures, Swift is left with just her feelings and her stories.

By challenging the very idea of what a pop song needs to bring to the table in order to make a complete statement, *folklore* proves that Taylor Swift doesn't need to make as much noise to get through to us as she has in the past ten years of molting stylistic rest-

lessness. The autumnal accompaniments, provided by the National's Aaron Dessner (see p.55) alongside his brother and bandmate, Bryce, as well as Swift's longtime production partner Jack Antonoff, are not a rejection of pop music so much as a reduction of it. In the quiet of a tune like "my tears ricochet," all vocals and slowly swelling electroacoustic instruments, there's nothing to hide behind—no loud, radio-friendly bells and whistles to elevate hit potential. A middling lyricist and melodist wouldn't be able to carry it. The album floats because, beneath the dramatic twists, Taylor Swift is a writer's writer. Her stories here are more purposeful, if a little less personal. She's obsessed not just with people falling in and out of love but the long tail of these connections. There is a Faulknerian interest in multiple outside protagonists and in stories that span decades. The "folk" in *folklore* isn't so much a statement of purpose with regard to genre as it is a signal that this is her storytelling album. The Dessners' trademark folk-pop quietude, at least as manifested on the National's 2019 album, *I Am Easy to Find*, is the perfect canvas for Swift to show her wares and nod to her influences.

From the title to the music, *folklore* is an album about the wisdom and experience passed down through generations. On the opener, "the 1," Swift muses languidly: "You know, the greatest loves of all time are over now." It doesn't stop her from pining for a storybook romance of her own or gesturing to some of the great love songs in recent history in her writing. The track "the last great american dynasty" recounts the tale of the heyday of Rebekah Harkness, the ill-fated philanthropist and widow of an oil scion whose family life was marred by suicide attempts and murder charges. "mad woman" appears to pick the story back up years later, as a nameless woman stewes over a life lived under public scrutiny. "epiphany" is a flashback to Swift's grandfather's involvement in WWII's Operation Watchtower, the inaugural land offensive in the war against Japan and its acquisitions across the Pacific, which uses a wounded soldier's dark night of the soul to spin a timely yarn about courage in spite of illness and the nearness of mortality. *folklore* uses allegory to illuminate present realities the way great American songwriters and archivists do. Swift is able to address recent troubles with music-industry men and tap into the era's chilling pulse without naming culprits, to point out the universality of American calamity without being bogged down by specifics.

While it does all that, *folklore* pays respects to its predecessors, left turns in rock and pop history like the Smashing Pumpkins' *Adore*, a gothic folk opus born

out of death and doused in electronic atmospherics from Nitzer Ebb's *Bon Harris*; Bruce Springsteen's *Tunnel of Love*, the Boss's synth-laced snapshot of a failing marriage and a band on the precipice of an extended hiatus; and *Automatic for the People*, where R.E.M. made a mint ditching the pop smarts of "Shiny Happy People" and "Stand," fixating instead on pain and loss in a series of acoustic career highlights. It's reductive to call *folklore* the return to Taylor Swift's roots some have been waiting for since the EDM excursions on 2012's *Red* became the main thrust of 1989. It's more like a trip to an alternate universe where Rough Trade and 4AD indie-rock and dream-pop acts like Mazzy Star and the Cocteau Twins played the same field as blockbuster artists of the '90s like the Cranberries and Sarah McLachlan. It also fulfills the promise of the Cowboy Junkies fan service in *Lover*'s title track and confirms the

subtle, wide-reaching impact of the electroacoustic warfare at work in the recent Bon Iver albums, which is, itself, a mutant strain of '80s and '90s Americana.

It's tempting to say that *folklore* is a breakup album of sorts, but it's not necessarily obvious what Taylor Swift is breaking up with here. Is she done with Joe Alwyn, the boyfriend whose secret companionship seemed to inspire the giddier songs on *reputation* and *Lover*? Is she through with trying to please every audience at once, pitching massive singles into the space between pop, hip-hop, and dance music? Or is she, like the rest of us, just missing a life where we could go and behave as we pleased, responding to the jarring shift in the mechanics of friendships, relationships, work life, and nightlife by sliding under her covers and playing sad songs until the outside world fades from view? Maybe she'll tell us next year. ■

#### BOOKS / MOLLY YOUNG

## Walking Down the Garden Path Zadie Smith's book of pandemic essays makes a joyful case for inconsistency.



TIME HAS BEEN doing wild things over the past few months, but in some ways it has been easier to mark its passing since the pandemic began. This is because there are landmarks. One landmark is the Day You Started Using Your Shirtsleeve to Cover Your Thumb Before Pressing an ATM Button. Another is the Day That a Majority of People Started Wearing Masks. Maybe there is the Day That Someone You Know Got Sick. Or worse, You Got Sick. Or worse, Someone You Know Died. Time speeds up and slows down, but it is divided into discrete stages so our experience of it is both psychedelic and delineated. This is the ruling aesthetic of *Intimations*, Zadie Smith's small book of essays, all written in the spring and zipped into publication just as COVID-19 hit an all-time high in the U.S.

The book begins at the Jefferson Market Garden, a space in Greenwich Village that is exactly the shape of the state of Georgia but in miniature. Smith is struck by some tulips blooming in the garden. She finds them vulgar—their simple shape, their gauche colors, like something a kid would draw in Magic Marker. The "predatory way" she ogles them reminds her of *Lolita*. (The word choices make sense; never forget, after all, that flowers are plant genitals.) Smith notices two other women roughly her age who are also mesmerized by the flowers, and they exchange smiles. "I didn't need a Freudian to tell me that three middle-aged women, teetering at the brink of perimenopause, had been drawn to a gaudy symbol of fertility and renewal in the middle of a barren concrete metropolis," she writes. That was a few days before what she calls the "global humbling"—before the garden closed, before a sad note was posted on the garden's website that currently tells people they can't penetrate the space's perimeter but should "take a moment to look through the fence."

So, tulips. Staring at them outside the garden, Smith notes that her

inner production designer would have preferred it if the flowers were peonies; that peonies would have made a better scene, somehow. More tasteful in their complexity. But Smith's inner Smith is powerless before the blobby splendor of the tulips. She submits and, in the submission, finds a preview of the next several months of submission at every level: societal, personal, physiological, floral. Writing is a process of wrangling control over experience. It can be disorienting for an individual like Smith to go outside, into a medium that is not a Word document, and undergo a minor loss of attentional control at the hands of a flower she considers kind of wack. But because she is a writer, she leaves the garden and composes an essay about the experience, whipping it into shape. And then she goes back outside. And so on, back and forth, control and its loss, until the essay is finished. At all of 2,000 words, it is a brief but scenic route through the author's brain.

This—"brief but scenic route"—is probably as good a synonym as any for the intimations of the book's title. Some of the six pieces collected here are less essay than episode. Smith will pick up an idea, check it out, put it down, pick up another. This is an author best known for writing fiction that she has described as "worming itself into many different bodies, many different lives," and though you wouldn't think the habit would carry over into minuscule personal episodes/essays, it does. Smith writes both like Zadie Smith and an extraterrestrial imitating Zadie Smith. She's an omniscient narrator of her own experiences, most of which are intensely outward facing; she's an inveterate people-watcher. (The people-watching part is probably the one quality that is a rock-solid prerequisite for a novel-

ist, by the way, though not an essayist.)

The second piece diagrams a short statement from Donald Trump about the pandemic: "I wish we could have our old life back. We had the greatest economy that we've ever had, and we didn't have death." That's from a set of remarks delivered on March 29 from the Rose Garden. In the same way that a fern leaflet mimics the shape of the larger frond, the shape of the statement's idiocy fully replicates the larger idiocy that produced it. It is beautiful, almost, this example of what you could call Trump's Fractal, where the deficits of a man's mind are reproduced at the sentence level of magnification. Smith's piece begins with her observing the president's dawning suspicion that his own country is the shithole now; it continues as a lament for the state of health care and a question about why many Americans—the ones at bars, the ones without masks—cannot conceive of a public interest that could possibly supersede a private one.

Then there's an essay about the ancient phenomenon of essays on the topic of "why I write." Smith's answer is that writing is merely ... something to do. Having "something to do" is why a lot of people do a lot of things. Especially now, stranded at home; especially those who aren't essential workers; and especially, especially those without children (because those with children always have "something to do," it may in fact be the defining quality of parenthood). Now, Smith writes, the world is divided between those whose task is "vital and unrelenting" and "the rest of us, all with a certain amount of time on our hands." You'd think that writers, who are accustomed to unstructured time and solitude, might thrive in a pandemic. But Smith's habit of self-imposed schedules

INTIMATIONS:  
SIX ESSAYS  
BY ZADIE SMITH.  
PENGUIN.

begins to look paltry, dry, and sad to her. So, again, why write? "The best I can say for it is it's a psychological quirk of mine developed in response to whatever personal failings I have." She sees no difference between writing and making banana bread.

This is a revision of her previous thoughts on writing. "I used to stand at podiums or in front of my own students and have that answer on the tip of my tongue, but knew if I said it aloud it would be mistaken for a joke or fake humility or perhaps plain stupidity," Smith writes of her humble "something to do" defense of writing. This is a minor instance of a turn that happens in every piece—a moment when Smith revises herself or catches herself in a mistake. when the pinball of her thinking hits a bumper and rockets off in a new direction. In one anecdote, she eavesdrops on a pair of women (to her ear, "obviously working class") talking with astonishment about watching a lady push a stroller containing a 9-month-old baby gripping an iPad. Smith thinks their incredulity is rooted in the notion of rich people, too lazy or busy to parent, fobbing off their children to mind-altering technology. Then it becomes clear that the women are actually talking about the derangement of entrusting an infant with a \$900 device. "In my privilege," Smith realizes, "I had mistaken one kind of ethical argument for another." It is, she writes, "an especially bracing experience for me, as only a few years earlier I would not have made such a mistake."

The pleasure of reading an essay is watching a mind at work and at play; the form is a tricky balance of discipline and discursiveness, of entertaining self-doubt and showing it the door. For Smith, doubt is part of the discipline. She wrote in an earlier essay that "I've always been aware of being an inconsistent personality"—the crux of which is not the inconsistency, which describes everybody on earth, but her acceptance of it. It's a peculiar quality of our era that people increasingly conflate intellectual flexibility and hypocrisy. Smith's first collection of nonfiction was called *Changing My Mind*, a naturally occurring human habit that has since become vilified. It is inconceivable to a broad swath of commentators that a person who, for example, tweeted an offensive joke seven years ago might have evolved into a person who is disgusted by that same joke, and that perhaps this person should reckon with her past rather than be fed into a digital wood chipper. Of course, there are degrees. Some people belong in the wood chipper. But it's also true that consistency is for machines, and this collection—cooked up quickly, with a few lumps left in the batter—makes a joyful case for its opposite. ■



Zadie Smith

Rhodri Meilir,  
Gabrielle Creevy,  
and Jo Hartley.



TV / JEN CHANEY

## Family Strife

*In My Skin* veers between coming-of-age comedy and serious drama.

**BETHAN GWYNDAF**, the teenage protagonist of *In My Skin*, is a spectacular liar.

She lies to her best friends, her teachers, and the girl she develops a crush on, spinning tales of a better-than-normal home life that sound credible. Her mother works in human resources, and her father is a tax officer, she says. She gets in trouble with them when she comes home too late, and they want to watch TV with her when she's actually there. If Bethan backs out of plans with a friend, it's because her parents want to do something special with her, like go to the ballet.

But none of that is true. As displayed throughout the five episodes of *In My Skin*, a BBC series that has been released in the U.S. on Hulu, Bethan's mother is bipolar and constantly in and out of the hospital. Her father is a raging alcoholic who takes zero responsibility for anything. The only functioning, compassionate adult in Bethan's household is Bethan, even though, at 16, she's technically still a child whose biggest fear is that, at some point, everyone will find out her blessed home life is actually her curse.

Bethan's fear of being discovered is based on *In My Skin* creator Kayleigh Llewellyn's own experience as a teenager concealing

her bipolar mom's condition. But even if viewers hit PLAY on the first episode without knowing that its writer lived a version of what Bethan is living, they'll sense the authenticity thanks to the vividness of the world Llewellyn has built—from the alternately gritty and gorgeous Cardiff setting, where Llewellyn herself grew up, to the hormonally driven cruelty that assumes various forms among Bethan's schoolmates.

Gabrielle Creevy's performance as Bethan also goes a long way toward making this series so relatable. The actress, who has made appearances in several U.K. series, establishes herself as a natural star here, dropping untruths off her tongue with a "no biggie" attitude and a smile that makes you almost buy what she's selling, even when you've already borne witness

to her burdens. When Bethan deals with her mother, Trina (Jo Hartley in a rigorous but thoroughly controlled performance), Creevy is at her most heartbreaking—alternating between showering gentleness on Trina when she's in a calm space and recoiling when her mother's mood swings into unrepentant nastiness. In the first episode, during a hospital visit, Trina calls her daughter a bitch and has to be restrained by nurses. Creevy immediately reverts to a frightened little girl, her eyes betraying a

helplessness that she knows intimately but still shocks her. Bethan walks every moment of every day on a tightrope between being almost okay and having her worst nightmares come true. Anyone who has ever had to care for a mentally ill loved one, especially a parent, will recognize themselves in every fraught expression that takes command of Creevy's face.

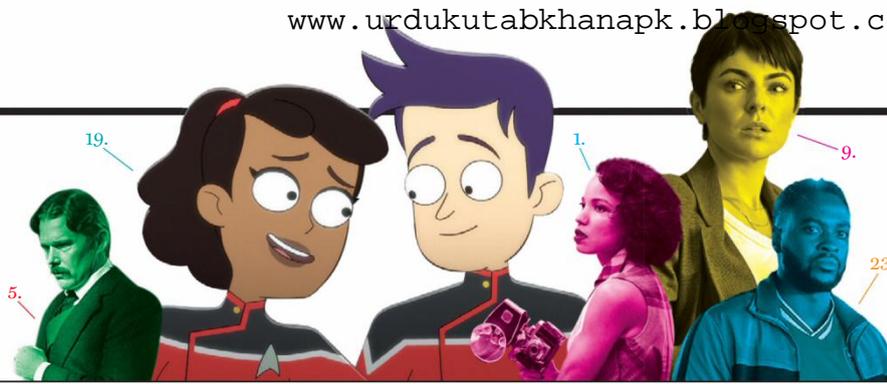
Just as Bethan alters her persona from moment to moment, *In My Skin* skids from coming-of-age comedy to serious family drama and back again multiple times in each of its five episodes without any tonal slipups. Some of the sharpest comedy comes from Di Botcher, who plays Nan, Bethan's paternal grandmother and the only grown-up in Bethan's life who understands what she's dealing with and makes an effort to alleviate her stress. "All right, let's kick this in the dick, then," Nan says just before she and Bethan enter the hospital for another visit. The salt sprinkled throughout *In My Skin* makes the tough subject matter easier to digest but no less brutal in its honesty.

Although the episodes are only half an hour long, a lot happens in each one. Still, under the supervision of director Lucy Forbes, whose credits include multiple episodes of *The End of the F\*\*\*ing World*, they never feel overpacked. When scenes veer between reality and fantasy—there's a laugh-out-loud sequence in which Bethan imagines a dance circle breaking out around her when she shows up at school with her hair down and contouring powder streaked across her face—they function not just as cheeky gimmicks but as illustrations of the duality that defines Bethan's entire existence. (What actually happens when Bethan shows up to school looking like that? Her best friend, Lydia, played by Poppy Lee Friar, tells her she looks like Saruman from *The Lord of the Rings*.)

As overcast as Bethan's environment is—and it literally is, since she lives in Wales—there are moments of brightness that manage to sneak their way in before circumstances inevitably turn dire again. Every time something good happens for her, you practically want to beg the universe to please give this girl a break and let her dwell in a small streak of sunshine for a little bit. Some coming-of-age stories are designed to demonstrate how important it is for its impressionable characters to learn life lessons. While *In My Skin*, which hopefully will yield a second season, doesn't condone Bethan's dishonesty, it suggests that dropping the deceit she wears like a suit of armor isn't just the right thing to do. It may also be the only way she can step outside of all those shadows and into something that resembles real light. ■

IN MY SKIN  
HULU.

For more culture coverage and streaming recommendations, see [vulture.com](http://vulture.com).



The CULTURE PAGES

To

# DO



Twenty-five things to see, hear, watch, and read.

AUGUST 5-19

## TV

### 1. Watch *Lovecraft Country*

*Haunted and haunting.*

HBO, August 16.

Misha Green developed this series centered on Atticus (Jonathan Majors), a Black man searching for his missing father (Michael Kenneth Williams) in the Jim Crow South of the '50s with help from his friend (Jurnee Smollett) and his uncle (Courtney B. Vance). As in Matt Ruff's source novel, the horrors they encounter are both racist and supernatural. Given that, it's no surprise that Jordan Peele is an executive producer. **JEN CHANEY**

## BOOKS

### 2. Read *The Death of Vivek Oji*

*From a rising star.*

Riverhead Books.

One of the year's most anticipated releases, Akwaeke Emezi's latest novel, set in a town in southeastern Nigeria, concerns a family mourning the mysterious death of their child.

## THEATER/FESTIVALS

### 3. See Edinburgh Fringe Festival

*Just add haggis.*

edfringe.com, August 7 to 31.

The tumultuous, city-spanning excitement of the Edinburgh Fringe may have gone dormant for 2020, but the Scottish interwebs are still afire with art. Each Friday in August, there'll be an hourlong variety show; wannabe Fringe-bingers should tune in to the Pick N Mix video platform, where acts

upload one-minute glimpses of their work. On August 17, there's a stand-up blitz, co-released with Comedy Central International, and Penguin Random House's Edinburgh Unlocked, which operates like an audiobook but is a curated comedy-and-storytelling mini-fest. **HELEN SHAW**

## POP MUSIC

### 4. Listen to *Microphones in 2020*

*Name-dropper.*

P.W. Elverum & Sun, August 7.

After 15 years as Mount Eerie, singer-songwriter Phil Elverum resurrects his old pen name, the Microphones. Much has changed since the last Microphones set, which landed in 2003, but Elverum remains a nakedly honest tunesmith and a spirited guitar player. **CRAIG JENKINS**

## MOVIES/FESTIVALS

### 5. See *Tesla*

*At the drive-in.*

Rooftop Films' Queens Drive-In at New York Hall of Science, Corona, August 13.

Rooftop Films, now a drive-in fest, is showing Michael Almereyda's strange, often beautiful film about the inventor Nikola Tesla (Ethan Hawke), which is less concerned with scientific achievement and biographical drama than finding a cinematic language to match the complications of Tesla's life. It won't win any Oscars, but it's well worth your time. **BILGE EBIRI**

## OPERA

### 6. Listen to *Proving Up*

*A debut recording.*

Pentatone, August 21.

The chamber opera that Missy Mazzoli wrote with

librettist Royce Vavrek gets its first recording, performed by the original Opera Omaha cast. It's a work of prairie claustrophobia, and though it's set in the 19th century, it resonates with our current moment of national weirdness and also offers a promise of things to come at the Metropolitan Opera, which has commissioned Mazzoli to write a large-scale opera based on George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo*. **JUSTIN DAVIDSON**

## MOVIES

### 7. See *An American Pickle*

*Time to brush up on Yiddish.*

HBO Max, August 6.

Seth Rogen, pulling double duty in this melancholy comedy from writer Simon Rich, plays Herschel Greenbaum, an Eastern European immigrant from 1919, and Herschel's great-grandson, Ben, an indecisive app developer in present-day Brooklyn. It takes a pickling accident and some magical realism to bring the two men together, but what unfolds once they're united is a clever exploration of what we opt to keep, and what we choose to discard, of the hopes, values, and traditions of our forebears. **ALISON WILLMORE**

## ART

### 8. See *Alien Landscape*

*Reopenings.*

303 Gallery, 555 West 21st Street, through August 21.

In this group show, artists are seeing their world with fresh eyes, depicting vistas, biomolecular phenomena, plants, and creatures. Sam Falls's paintings of what look like waterfalls of leaves bring delight, Jane & Louise Wilson give us granular photos of unknown origin but beautiful color, and Mary Heilmann paints a blue wave that is so free you want to just let it stay this way forever. **JERRY SALTZ**

## TV

### 9. Watch *Coroner*

*Many more suspicious deaths.*

The CW, August 5.

This Canadian series, about a recently widowed Toronto coroner (Serinda Swan) whose specialty is suspicious deaths, was added to the CW schedule post-pandemic because the summer television lineup must and will go on. **J.C.**

## ART

### 10. See *Gary Simmons*

*The show is titled "Screaming Into the Ether."*

metropictures.com, through September 19.

At Metro Pictures, Gary Simmons reconsiders his signature "erasure" technique and the cartoon figures he first appropriated in the early 1990s: a parade of characters from Looney Tunes, like Bosko. These paintings, rendered in a ghostly, beautiful sort of chalk-on-slate appearance, are as haunting as the sources are foul. **J.S.**

## POP MUSIC

### 11. Listen to *Smile*

*Motivational fare.*

Capitol Records, August 14.

After a year of promising singles like the sultry "Harleys in Hawaii," the soaring "Daisies," and the

stately “Never Worn White,” Katy Perry returns. Expect the “Dark Horse” singer to touch on life changes, which Perry says concern her “journey towards the light” since overcoming depression and becoming pregnant with her first child. C.J.

**CLASSICAL MUSIC/FESTIVALS**

12. **Hear Sun Valley Music Festival**

*Fourteen concerts filmed in 43 cities.*

svmusicfestival.org, through August 19.

The Idaho-based festival is taking a big step beyond streaming old material or basement recitals; it has made high-quality video recordings around the country. One ambitiously varied program on August 11 involves several soloists—harpist Julia Coronelli, oboist Erik Behr with pianist Orion Weiss, clarinetist Jason Shafer, and violinist Polina Sedukh—capped by the third movement of Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony No. 6*. It’s as close to the collective experience of a summer festival as we’re going to get. J.D.

**MOVIES**

13. **See Made in Italy**

*The film has an undeniable power.*

In theaters and VOD, August 7.

Liam Neeson and his real-life son, Micheál Richardson, play a bickering, grief-stricken father and son who arrive in the Italian countryside to renovate and sell the family villa. The story is strictly boilerplate, but the film has an added charge because of the fact that Natasha Richardson, Neeson’s late wife and Micheál’s mother, died tragically in 2009—and we can sense the personal stakes in the two men’s fine performances. B.E.

**CLASSICAL MUSIC**

14. **Hear Conrad Tao**

*At Tanglewood.*

bso.org, August 15.

As part of Tanglewood’s online season, pianist and composer Conrad Tao performs a recital of socially

**So, Rumaan Alam, What’s on Your Summer Reading List?**

*The author of the forthcoming novel Leave the World Behind (Ecco, October 6) on the books on his nightstand.*

“I’VE BEEN RECOMMENDING Lynn Steger Strong’s *Want* (Henry Holt & Co.) to everyone I know. It’s a superb, down-it-in-one-night read. I found Makenna Goodman’s *The Shame* (Milkweed Editions, August 11), a slender, one-long-afternoon-at-the-shore read, to be a nice companion to Lynn’s book; the novels share concerns but have wholly different sensibilities. One big fall book I’ve already read and loved is Bryan Washington’s *Memorial* (Riverhead Books, October 27). It’s a heart-breaker, but also full of joy (and food, sex, longing, and love), and is quite possibly the only novel that has ever made me feel hungry. That’s some kind of magic.”

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### SOLUTION TO LAST ISSUE'S PUZZLE

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engaged music, from Felipe Lara's *Injust Intonations* (#BlackLivesMatter) to works by Beethoven, Tania León, Ruth Crawford Seeger, David Lang, and Tao himself. J.D.

#### BOOKS

### 15. Read *The Unreality of Memory*

*Poetic and noetic.*

FSG Originals, August 11.

Elisa Gabbert's essay collection "on disaster culture, climate anxiety, and our mounting collective sense of doom" is not necessarily uplifting but brilliant so as to be both soothing and invigorating.

#### TV

### 16. Watch *Ted Lasso*

*If you miss sports.*

Apple TV+, August 14.

Jason Sudeikis stars as a thoroughly American coach drafted to lead a British soccer team. Culture clashes ensue. J.C.

#### MOVIES

### 17. See *The Burnt Orange Heresy*

*A rescheduled release.*

In theaters August 7.

In director Giuseppe Capotondi's languid thriller, Claes Bang is an art critic who's fallen on hard times and Elizabeth Debicki is a mysterious American who drifts into his orbit just as he's headed to the villa of a wealthy collector played by no less than Mick Jagger. There are nefarious dealings, but most important, there's enough footage of beautiful people lounging in crinkled linens by Lake Como for those longing for a summer holiday. A.W.

#### POP MUSIC

### 18. Listen to *Purple Noon*

*Inspired by Mediterranean coastlines.*

Sub Pop, August 7.

Singer-songwriter-producer Ernest Greene's music as Washed Out is light and sweet, evocative of a cool drink on a hot summer day. Album No. 4 keeps the streak going with tunes that recast the act's gauzy DIY sound as soothing '80s pop à la the more bubbly Sting and Sade classics of the era. It's a daring pivot that goes over swimmingly. C.J.

#### TV

### 19. Watch *Star Trek: Lower Decks*

*While you wait for Picard to return.*

CBS All Access, August 6.

Will fans enjoy this animated addition to the franchise, which focuses on the misfits among the USS *Cerritos's* crew? I mean, maybe, since it's the only new *Star Trek* they can get right now. J.C.

#### BOOKS

### 20. Read *Caste*

*From a Pulitzer winner.*

Random House, August 4.

In *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson (*The Warmth of Other*

*Suns*) reveals more about the inner workings of America by examining its hidden caste system, one governed by economic and racial hierarchies along with institutional structures that prioritize the powerful and demonize the less advantaged.

#### CLASSICAL MUSIC

### 21. Hear *Ten Thousand Birds*

*In an open-air pavilion.*

PS21, Chatham, New York, August 7.

John Luther Adams is the composer of the outdoors, weaving the sounds of wind and rolling currents into works intended to be heard in the landscape. For PS21, he stitched birdcalls into a sonic tapestry that the ensemble Alarm Will Sound will perform in accord with pandemic restrictions: musicians and audience members spread out across open terrain, creating a poetic confusion of artificial and natural sounds. J.D.

#### MOVIES

### 22. See *Two Lovers*

*The romance of cinema.*

Metrograph Digital, metrograph.com, August 19 to 21 at 8 p.m. ET.

The Metrograph has launched a series of virtual screenings with set times, preshow material, intros, and Q&As, all in an attempt to replicate a full theatrical experience. Among the gems: James Gray's 2008 romance, with Joaquin Phoenix as a lovesick Brooklynite. Gray will introduce. B.E.

#### TV

### 23. Watch *We Hunt Together*

*Deadly dynamic duo.*

Showtime, August 9.

The trailer for this British series, about a serial-killing couple and the two cops attempting to catch them, gives off some major *Killing Eve* vibes. J.C.

#### CLASSICAL MUSIC

### 24. Hear Roberto Alagna and Aleksandra Kurzak

*Live on the French Riviera.*

metstarslive.brightcove-services.com.org, August 16.

The Met has launched Met Stars in Concert, a regular series of vocal recitals broadcast live from picturesque venues. It would be hard to match the scenery of Château de la Chèvre d'Or in the cliff-top village of Èze, France, or the audience appeal of the husband-and-wife team singing romantic duos by the setting sun. Only the orchestra will be missing or, rather, reduced to a string quintet. J.D.

#### MOVIES

### 25. See *Sputnik*

*A creepy cosmonaut.*

In select theaters and VOD, August 14.

A Soviet space mission in 1983 goes horribly awry, and the lone survivor is a bitter amnesiac who, it seems, is now host to a gruesome alien creature. A psychologist (Oksana Akinshina) has to help figure out just what is going on with this man. Part alien horror flick, part psychological drama, from first-time director Egor Abramenko. B.E.



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when Rahman was about to come over but first sat alone in a restaurant eating sushi, rather than contribute to the convenient waste created by takeout containers.

**M**ATTIS WAS, in some ways, the opposite. He had grown up a compulsive joiner. At St. Andrew's, the setting of *Dead Poets Society*, Mattis played football, though he wasn't much good. He wrestled in the winter, and in the spring he was in the play. Together with school friends, he went to Washington, D.C., and marched for Darfur, meeting then-Senator Barack Obama and insisting on a photograph, and he participated in an annual AIDS walk. At Princeton, Mattis joined both Cap and Gown, one of the most selective of its eating clubs, and Terrace, one of the least. He joined DKE, a beer-pounding fraternity, at the urging of friends. "I specifically remember him saying, 'They do community service, so why not?'" a friend from the time remembers. "It was a 'why not?' thing. It was one of the many circles he ran in." Mattis took an intro course to African-American studies with Cornel West, had leadership roles in the Black Student Union, and helped to organize Popeyes study breaks. At college, he sometimes went to Bible study. (Later, he was known for telling friends who were feeling blue that "God on high acts on low" and at the same time urged friends discouraged by the dating scene to get out there. "Anybody with a body can get bodied," he would say.)

Wherever he lived—whether in the dorms or, more recently, in a beautiful three-bedroom apartment in Crown Heights with a balcony and roof access, the extra bedroom of which he would Airbnb, so there was always a Japanese or German tourist around—became the place where people got together. Andrew Devlin lived next door to him on their hall in high school and remembers his particular interest in questions of equity in education. Mattis's way was to talk, dissect, agree, disagree, and talk some more, to the point where a bunch of teenage boys were sitting around the dorms at "two or three o'clock in the morning to figure it out," Devlin says. "What was the best way forward? Going to Prep for Prep? Was the

answer to take gifted kids like him and give them a really good education? Or was it better to just focus on public school and improve the baseline education for kids around the country?" In his senior year of high school, inspired by the mash-up in his mind of the material in his colonialism class and the Kanye West song "Diamonds From Sierra Leone," Mattis put together a forum on diamond mining. He wrote about its effect on him in the alumni magazine: "By talking about this issue that was basically new to all of us, we learned that in everyday life we contribute to injustices in places far away and out of sight."

**S**INCE LAST SUMMER, Rahman had been working at Bronx Legal Services, where she belonged to a team of roughly 60 lawyers representing people who want to fight eviction proceedings but can't afford an attorney. On the Friday night before her arrest, Rahman was on a Zoom call until about 6 p.m. It was a union meeting. After a months-long hiatus, the courts had begun to schedule hearings so pending eviction cases might resume, and the defender-advocates at Bronx Legal Services objected strenuously. "Everything was happening with George Floyd," says someone who was on the call. "And I don't know about you, but I was still hearing sirens. And the courts are like, 'Get those evictions done.'"

About 20 people attended the meeting, the purpose of which was to share information. Rahman didn't say much, which was typical for her at work. The job at Bronx Legal Services is grinding—many of the clients live in extreme poverty and chaos, processes are sticky, and judges and plaintiffs' attorneys can be petty, racist, sexist, and mean—but Rahman was always "very chill, very easygoing," says the same co-worker, a collaborative colleague, compassionate and diligent with her clients and levelheaded in court, willing to engage with the small-bore, unglamorous work of advocating for the vulnerable within the frustrating constraints of the law. Unlike the earnest, paternalistic types who might have previously chosen Legal Aid as a career, the youngest lawyers at Bronx Legal Services have a radical strain—some wear tattoos reading RENT IS THEFT—but Rahman never seemed to be part of that. Any number of her colleagues might have been accused of throwing a Molotov cocktail into a cop car, and the news would have been met with an unsurprised shrug, this colleague says: "Eh, that checks out." But Rahman came across as so calm. "I was shocked."

Mattis's friends were in disbelief. He was always conciliatory, never confrontational. "He's not a person to bring down the mood,"

Iheoma reflects. "He doesn't like to put that burden on people." But when his mother got sick, Mattis struggled. After she died, he moved out of Crown Heights and back to East New York to help care for the three foster children (the oldest is 11) who were under her care. "Colin didn't have the luxury of stressing about the things that people in the upper echelons of society stress about," says Eric Plummer, one of his closest friends at Princeton. Instead, he compartmentalizes. "He does get stressed, worried, concerned—like, pensive. He becomes introspective. You have to know him to know when he's stressed; it's like something is off." Mattis didn't tell Plummer that his mother had died until months after the fact, and he did so in a sideways fashion. "He said, 'Oh, by the way, I have kids now,'" says Plummer. "I was like, 'What are you talking about, Colin? It takes nine months to make a child.'"

Jazzy Ellis, another Princeton friend, was texting with Mattis the week George Floyd was killed. Ellis is a stuntwoman, dependent on movie production for survival, so she was already feeling unmoored after months of unemployment and isolation. After the video began circulating, she went for a drive just to clear her head—she lived alone in Atlanta at the time—and was called the N-word three separate times. Upon arriving back home, she began reaching out to her Black friends and texted Mattis. "I was just trying to connect with other people who might be feeling the same way. I guess I was feeling scared," she says. At Princeton, Ellis was perhaps more self-protective than Mattis and immersed herself more exclusively in the Black student organizations on campus, while he was more outward facing, "a connector," she recalls. "Very happy, happy all the time. Always smiling. A chipper, super-positive guy," though if you watched him closely you could see "a little aspect of sadness through his smile." In their texts that afternoon, she and Mattis talked about "how confused we were, in this situation, in this pandemic, feeling how we were as Black people in America. I was unemployed. I believe he was furloughed. We weren't really grounded. We were both pretty low. I could see how it might lead to something drastic. We were only texting, but it felt like he wasn't smiling anymore."

**T**HE PROSECUTORS IN the national-security unit of the Eastern District of New York—as close to Trump Land as one gets in Brooklyn—must have celebrated when they saw the NYPD record of the arrest. "This case was so juicy for them," says a public defender who is familiar with it. "It's a perfect storm of 'Antifa is a terrorist

organization, and here are two lawyers of color we can hang out to dry.’”

There were meaningful and consequential ways to charge Mattis and Rahman under state statutes, but sometime on May 30, their case was bumped up to the Feds; by that night, Mattis and Rahman were being held at the Metropolitan Detention Center, the same federal facility in Brooklyn where Ghislaine Maxwell is now being held. After signing the indictment for Mattis and Rahman, the U.S. Attorney in the Eastern District originally in charge of the case, Richard Donoghue, moved down to Washington, D.C., to work under William Barr in the Justice Department.

Their mug shots indicate that, in the early morning hours of May 30, Mattis and Rahman may not quite have comprehended the trap they were in. Mattis looks startled, a little lost. Rahman wears a small smile, defiant. As lawyers immersed in social-justice struggles, they might have predicted the antagonism of their own government, but even so, the full force of federal prosecution was surely disorienting. The federal indictment, filed on June 11, makes a case for domestic terrorism. It charges Mattis and Rahman with conspiracy. It describes the police car as a vehicle “used in interstate and foreign commerce.” It categorizes the Molotov cocktail as “an incendiary device,” which, in the legal code, includes homemade bombs along with grenades and missiles. The use of this type of “destructive device” in a “crime of violence,” with which Mattis and Rahman were also charged, carries a minimum sentence three times what it would have been if they had instead used a gun.

To those on the progressive left, that makes for an illuminating, absurd contrast. In her video interview from May 29, Rahman makes the point herself, drawing a bright line between destruction of life and of government property. Her lawyer, Paul Shechtman, interprets the events of that night the same way. Mattis and Rahman approached “a vehicle that was empty and abandoned and not near a lot of people,” he says. “It was parked on the road, badly damaged by prior incidents. It had a real quality of saying ‘Fuck you’ to the police. If what they had done was write something on the police vehicle that was abandoned, you could say, ‘Get control of yourself. You’re a lawyer.’ This was one step further down the path but motivated by the same sense of frustration and anger and the sense of *This never stops*.” He adds, “I haven’t found anybody yet outside of the people who brought these charges who think that 45 years is an appropriate sentence. Or ten years. Or five years, given the background of these people, given the damage that wasn’t done.”

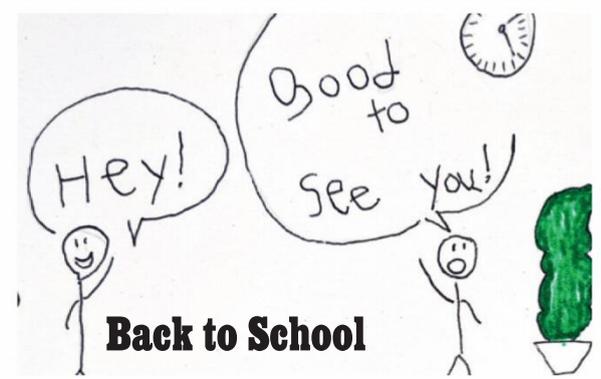
Mattis and Rahman’s friends, many of

whom are career activists, set to work during the early-morning hours of May 30. They called one another. They called other lawyers. A friend brought granola bars and water to the precinct house and begged the officers out front to give them to their friends. They reached out to the people they knew at the Federal Defenders of New York, which provides free representation to people charged with federal crimes, and reached out to everyone else they knew, too. Because despite their social connections and impressive résumés, Rahman and Mattis had, in fact, no money. Bail was set at \$250,000 each and was guaranteed by their relatives and friends (the ones who worked in the private sector or in big law). On June 3, Rahman, back at home, went to a Zoom meeting at work.

But the prosecutors moved to keep Rahman and Mattis detained—an indication of how aggressive they intended to be—and on June 5, a three-judge panel in the Second Circuit agreed, sending Mattis and Rahman back into the detention center. Each was placed in isolation because of coronavirus guidelines, in effect giving them a stint in solitary confinement. They were held for nearly three weeks, until June 23, when a different panel of judges in the Second Circuit heard arguments by Shechtman and Sabrina Shroff, Mattis’s lawyer. The government had argued that Mattis and Rahman should be denied bail precisely because of their abundant social support, stable jobs, and clean arrest records; if they could commit such a grievous act despite all this stability, the argument went, who was to say they wouldn’t do it again? In an amicus brief, 56 current and former federal prosecutors argued that this was hogwash: If it held, they said, it could be used to deny bail in every case. Eventually, the Second Circuit agreed.

Since June 30, Mattis and Rahman have been home, wearing GPS ankle bracelets and seeing approved friends. The legal strategy, if it can be called strategic, is to dawdle until November, or even January, in the hope that a less politically pugnacious Justice Department will be ushered in.

Rahman is taking it day by day, receiving occasional calls from her Sufi spiritual adviser, praying with him, trying to stay in the present moment and focus on gratitude. Her mother keeps saying, “Focus on today, focus on today, focus on today,” according to a friend who saw them recently. Mattis, though, is thinking about what he wants to do next. “I gave him a really, really long hug,” says Iheoma of his recent visit. Mattis being Mattis, he was hashing over all his future options, this or that, given the likelihood that he will be disbarred. “And I was like, ‘I don’t know,’” Iheoma says, “‘maybe you could run for mayor one day.’” ■



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who have enjoyed the luxury of working from home in total bubbles be prepared to accept the same level of risk as those who continue to stock warehouses and deliver packages and drive cabs? Shouldn’t teachers, who signed up for a career in public service, be prepared to fulfill their obligations like other essential workers—the workers, in fact, who make virtually all other work possible?

But risk is separate from perceived risk. And perceived risk is closely bound up with one’s view of the people who are telling you that your risk is low.

The day after I spoke with Christakis, de Blasio and Carranza appeared together to officially announce their plan for a partial school reopening. The mayor said it would be the “greatest school year in New York City history.” Students could opt to go online-only for any reason; teachers and staff could request a medical exemption to work remotely. The schools, Carranza added, would be deep cleaned each night. And their HVAC systems would be upgraded.

I didn’t know what an HVAC system was, but it sounded good. And so did cleaning. Then I called Robert Troeller, president of Local 891 of the International Union of Operating Engineers. Troeller’s 800 members, technically called “custodian engineers,” are the keepers of the 1,400 buildings in the public-school system. They are responsible for every roof, window, sink, water fountain, toilet bowl, cafeteria floor, and stairwell. The current level of upkeep requires an annual budget of \$640 million just for staffing—not accounting for all the additional labor and supplies that will be needed for any COVID-related cleaning.

Troeller, himself a former custodial engineer, says the DOE’s cleaning protocols are unrealistic. “They are promising the teachers union and the teachers that they are going to have more of a presence of custodial workers to continually provide janitorial services during the day and do what they call a ‘deep cleaning’ at night,” he says. “To be honest with you, I don’t know what they mean when they say ‘deep cleaning.’”

Before COVID, Troeller says, deep cleaning referred to what happened during the summer, when entire buildings were scrubbed

and painted and waxed from wall to wall. “That’s certainly not happening overnight,” he says. “I think what they’re talking about is that each horizontal surface will be wiped down and cleaned and sanitized. The problem is that the budget we received on July 1 is the same budget that we received last year. They want all these additional surfaces cleaned; they want to have more custodial presence during the day and more cleaning at night. Well—who’s doing it? Where are the bodies going to come from?”

Troeller says his custodians will do their best, as they have been doing since March. They were at the schools throughout the shutdown, as the buildings were transformed into regional enrichment centers and food-distribution depots. They were there through the darkest days of the curfew, when Troeller urged his members to keep their DOE letters always on their person. They were essential workers. The custodians never left.

Troeller warns that parents should not expect schools to look as clean as they usually do. “People don’t understand that cleaning and sanitizing are two different things,” he says. “The more time you spend sanitizing, the less time you have to sweep and mop.” The decals that schools plan to put along hallways and stairwells to help with social distancing will make it harder to buff and shine the floors. But that won’t mean the school isn’t being cleaned where it needs to be. “Parents and teachers are going to expect the place to look cleaner, but it will look dirtier,” Troeller says. “But it will actually be more sanitized.”

Carranza’s promise, meanwhile, that every school will receive an update of its HVAC air-filtration system strikes custodians and teachers as a bad joke. Medi Ford has been trying to get her school to replace the tables in her classroom for the past year, without success. “If I can’t get money for desks,” she says, “how the fuck are they going to get HVAC right?” In fact, Troeller says, most schools were built so long ago that they *do not even have HVAC systems*. Installing one now would be “a monumental cost. There’s no realistic way to add it. Forget about cost—it would be a giant capital project.”

In most schools, Troeller says, the most effective air-filtration system is going to consist of opening the windows.

**I**N LATE JULY, about a month after the school walk-throughs, principals across the city held a series of all-school Zooms with parents to deliver the bad news: Students would be in school only one day in two or, in some cases, one day in three. One elementary school in Brooklyn told parents that the “day” would go from

8 a.m. to 11:20 a.m. Some high schools expressed their desire to go all remote.

On July 21, I attended the virtual meeting for my child’s elementary school. The assistant principal told us they had measured the school, counted the students, and come to the conclusion that they could accommodate half the student body at any given time. I felt a surge of relief: At least we had avoided the dreaded one in three. The school planned to go two days in person, then three days virtual. Now they were in the process of physically preparing the school, removing carpets and any extra furniture and leaving only the hard, cleanable exteriors of floors, desks, and plastic chairs.

But that, in a way, was the easy part. The assistant principal said 21 percent of parents at our school had indicated on the DOE survey that they wanted to go fully remote. The question of who exactly would be teaching those students was still up in the air, given that teachers at our school would be busy with the in-classroom cohorts.

A parent asked when the details would be available. The assistant principal said she did not know. “I *hope* it’s by August 7,” she said—the deadline for parents to select the online-only option.

The assistant principal, who used to teach math at the school, then went through a remarkable list of other things they still had not figured out. To keep the exits and entrances from turning into social-distancing catastrophes, the school would have to open more of its doors, but there were only two school-safety officers and no more forthcoming. If the state of the science come September was that everyone needed their temperature checked before entering the building, and there was only one school nurse but many school entrances, who would do the checking? And what if a kid had run to school, or ridden his bike, and his temperature was temporarily elevated—who would make the determination about that?

And on and on. To keep the bathrooms from having too many kids in them at any one time, someone would have to be posted outside—but who? And what about lunch? Teachers are contractually, and psychologically, obligated to leave the classroom for the lunch period and have some time to themselves. In which case, who would sit with the kids during lunch? Who would take out the trash from lunch? What about substitute teachers—did we want to invite a stranger, basically, to be with our kids, not knowing how careful that person had been about the virus? And what about recess? The DOE had not yet indicated whether recess would be allowed. The same was true for our school’s wonderful after-school program. Would it be okay as long as the

kids kept their social distance, or would it interfere with the deep cleaning that was supposed to take place every night?

Once she finished her presentation, while intermittently being climbed on by her 2-year-old, our assistant principal fielded dozens of questions from nervous parents. Marian Akinloye Ennis, the interior designer who had kept her kids at home since March, was impressed by the presentation. The administration seemed to have thought of everything. But there was so much that was still uncertain. There was still so much that none of us knew.

**B**Y THE LAST WEEK of July, barely a month before school would traditionally start, the conflict over reopening had reached new heights, spurred on by President Trump. The American Federation of Teachers announced it would support “safety strikes” at its locals if schools were forced to reopen under unsafe conditions. The move was directed at places where pro-Trump governors might try to open schools despite soaring COVID rates. Union leaders did not think things would come to that in New York. After all, COVID transmission was low, and it was possible that schools could open safely. But they also knew that many rank-and-file teachers would be strongly opposed to reentering classrooms this fall if the money necessary to guarantee a safe reopening does not appear.

The DOE defended its plan—“We had to reinvent the largest school system in the country,” says Alison Hirsh, a senior adviser to Carranza—but that didn’t make anyone like it. In the absence of clear leadership, other city officials began coming up with plans of their own to replace or supplement the one offered by the DOE. Brad Lander, a City Council member, proposed taking over rec centers, libraries, and other unused spaces to provide child care for parents on days when school was not in session. Mark Treyger, the chair of the council’s education committee, proposed an ambitious plan to delay reopening and arrange for elementary schools to take over high schools, insisting that the city could issue a “clarion call” for the extra teachers needed to implement the plan. Two days later, Public Advocate Jumaane Williams issued a similar plan.

The city quickly adopted a form of Lander’s day-care proposal, but it refused to consider a delayed reopening or prioritizing elementary-school students. The DOE also evinced little interest in a plan floated in a *Daily News* op-ed by three Brooklyn elementary-school teachers to increase outdoor learning. It was the obvious answer to the problem of both limited space and an airborne virus. But with the city offering no

verbal or logistical support for the idea, it became one more barometer of inequality: Only wealthy schools in Park Slope and the Upper West Side, situated near the vast expanses of Prospect and Central parks, were able to move forward with it. Rich white kids would go outside, explore nature, and not get sick; poor Black and brown kids would stay inside and face the risks.

Some inequalities, ironically, may cut in the other direction. In a push known as “prioritization,” a few districts are arguing that some kids—those with special needs, say, or the children of essential workers—should be allowed to attend school in person more often than other students because their need is greater. And many poor schools are so underenrolled that they have the space to bring back all their students in person, if the DOE and the union will let them give teachers’ aides their own classrooms. “The haves become the have-nots, and vice versa,” one school official told me.

Meanwhile, some of the cracks in the DOE plan were beginning to show. Leaders at Stuyvesant High School, one of the city’s most famous schools, recommended going all remote. The school was sorely overcrowded, and a poll of parents had revealed majority support for an all-online model. The DOE said it would not approve such a move: Parents could opt to go all remote, but a school as a whole could not. But the whole point of delegating so much decision-making to the schools had been to let them decide what was best for their communities. It seemed like a repeat of the city’s stubbornness in March.

Many teachers worry that the in-classroom experience, as envisioned by the DOE, won’t be very educational. “People think, *Yay, school is reopening; it’s going to be like it was*, but they don’t understand,” says one elementary-school teacher from Brooklyn. Students will be masked and constantly monitored. It will be less like a school and more like an airport—or worse. “You’re going to have kids who don’t have a mask,” Ford warns. “Either because they forgot it, or their parents couldn’t get one, or they don’t have the information. The school-safety officer is going to show up, and you’re going to have kids treated punitively.”

On July 31, de Blasio announced that schools will reopen only if New York maintains a citywide infection rate below 3 percent. (It’s currently at one percent.) Officials also revealed that individual schools will be closed for at least two weeks if just two students test positive for the coronavirus—a threshold that many schools are likely to hit. “The essence of this plan is safety for everyone,” the mayor insisted.

But despite the precautions, teachers worry that schools can’t be made safe: The

buildings are simply in too much disrepair. “You can’t undo decades of neglect and underfunding in a month,” says Liat Olenick, an author of the op-ed calling for outdoor learning. And many kids and teachers take the subway or the bus to school, which would further expose them to risk.

“I went through cancer,” says Ford. “Do I feel safe going back in the fall? I don’t know. But I don’t trust that it’ll be safe for all of us. There are just too many possible interactions—too many possible ways each person will be exposed to these particles.”

Annie Tan, a fifth-grade special-ed teacher in Sunset Park, shares the same fear. “I want to be back in school when it’s safe,” she says. “But I also don’t want kids to feel in a year’s time that their presence killed someone. I honestly think that’s going to happen.”

An activist union caucus called Movement of Rank and File Educators has floated the possibility of rolling sick-outs in September to protest the push to reopen schools. But most teachers aren’t members of MORE. One pre-K teacher I spoke with says she is not enthusiastic about going back to school, even though her principal has agreed to let her hold class outside. She feels it will be unsafe. “If someone sent me an invite for a birthday party right now with nine kids, I would say, ‘No, thanks!’” But she is going to show up for school. Her husband is out of work, and she can’t afford to go on leave and lose her salary. “I have to do what I have to do,” she says. “It’s like coming back after the six-week maternity leave you get from the DOE. You know it’s not right, but you have to do it.”

**O**NE MORNING IN late July, I traveled to Gravesend to meet with a principal named Barbara Tremblay. She grew up in Queens, dropped out of community college, and signed on to become a teacher’s aide, like her mother. She liked the work and eventually got a degree and then another, and became a special-ed teacher and then an assistant principal. She now heads up P.S. 721K, a special-ed high school.

As we walked through the school, she showed me the supply kits she’s putting together for students to use during remote learning: crayons, scissors, glue. Also “communication devices,” she says. I assumed this meant iPads, and in some cases it does. But she also showed me a big red plastic button with a cord attached. People who have use of their limbs, as well as some understanding of cause and effect, can use the button to play simple messages. Not all of Tremblay’s students would be able to use it. But some were doing very well with it.

With evident pride, Tremblay showed me

the school’s culinary classroom and the student-run café. She showed me the outdoor space, which she looks forward to using, in the shadow of a spur from the elevated subway. She described the basic logistics: 480 students, close to 300 staff; a total capacity, taking social distancing into account, of around 300. But it’s even more complicated than that. Some of her students do not have use of their arms, and it may not be safe for them to wear masks. Some of her students are not toilet trained: How was her staff to safely change their diapers? About a third of her students cannot walk unassisted. To avoid putting them on elevators, she is trying to schedule them all for the ground floor. Every morning at 7:45, she has a Zoom meeting with her four assistant principals. Every Monday, she has a Zoom meeting with her staff. Including them in all the planning has made her life easier, and kept her sane.

She showed me the small cluttered offices of her assistant principals, which face each other across a ten-by-ten-foot inlet in the main hallway. She planned to put in some bookshelves to block off the space from the hallway, turning it into a small classroom to make room for more students.

“What will happen to the assistant principals?” I asked.

“I don’t care!” said Tremblay. “They have laptops.”

We talked about the decision to reopen the schools. Tremblay said she was glad it was not her decision to make. I asked if she was scared, and she said anyone who isn’t scared hasn’t been reading the news. She herself is 49 and has asthma, which would qualify her for a medical exemption, but she does not intend to take it. “My responsibility here is too great,” she said. “Though I may be deluded when I say that.”

We walked into the hallway. The building is relatively new. Unlike most city schools, it has a central HVAC system. Still, the hallway felt stuffy. Tremblay and I were both wearing masks, and I was enjoying talking to her, but I wanted to get outside. I thought: What are we doing? Are we really going to stuff our kids into these child warehouses, endangering them, endangering their teachers?

I asked Tremblay if she would make the school go all remote if it were entirely up to her. She thought about it and said no. There are students at her school who have trouble with basic motor functioning; in the absence of the services and instruction they receive at P.S. 721K, she fears they may be regressing. “Too many kids need to come in,” she said.

And there it was—the dilemma facing every school, every teacher, every parent. And it hasn’t changed since March. ■



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feeling some pang of uncomfortable recognition or without reliving that pang the next time you are tempted to take one of the shortcuts she abhors—joining in when friends bemoan a loathed ex, ignoring a text instead of picking up the phone to make things right.

But people take shortcuts for a reason. Even before you arrive at the obstacles to solving problems like state violence, where implementing her theories is hard to imagine, just upholding Schulman's ideals within the personal sphere is a daunting task. "The social world she's describing is so *time consuming*," her friend Lana Dee Povitz told me. It demands constant self-scrutiny, ongoing dialogue, diligent fact-finding, and availability for intervention in the personal lives of one's friends. "That world she's asking for is nearly impossible under capitalism," Povitz said.

Povitz was a 26-year-old living in a queer collective in Brooklyn when she met Schulman. It was 2012. Povitz was part of a group of 20-somethings just learning how to organize—they wanted to fight gentrification—and she ran a book club that was reading Schulman's 2012 book, *Gentrification of the Mind*. After Povitz got in touch about reproducing some material, Schulman volunteered to come speak to her group.

Schulman wanted to start by hearing about them; she was curious about their lives and their work. She asked questions. She listened. And she asked more. *Did they know their neighbors? Povitz remembered Schulman asking. Did they help with the neighbors' kids? Did they know the local churches? Did they know what work the churches were already doing?*

"We were just like, 'No, no, no, no, we don't,'" Povitz told me. "Oh my God, we don't."

Schulman "doesn't do a lot of the feminine niceties that a lot of women seem trained to perform," Povitz said—things like the agreeable smiling and mirroring that smooth over mild social disjuncture and keep conversations rolling comfortably along. Instead of, say, offering gentle encouragement, Schulman made it plain how deeply "unimpressive" she found the group's efforts. They were not doing the

things Schulman believed necessary to make a material difference in others' lives, so she said so. "It was kind of devastating," Povitz recalled.

Today, Povitz teaches at Middlebury; she's a historian of U.S. social movements, and she often assigns Schulman's work. When we spoke, she was still audibly pained by the memory of their first encounter. Povitz remembered that plenty of people were upset: They were self-conscious, they got defensive, they found Schulman to be "mean and blunt." But Povitz also saw something else. "There were people who were really put off," she said. "And then there were people who were like, *This is hard, and I want to sit with it.*" The people in the group who were willing to sit with criticism, who could hear unflattering opinions and have difficult conversations—"those were the people I knew I wanted to identify with politically," she said. That willingness was valuable, Povitz realized, even if it was rare.

**U**PON MEETING her new editor at FSG, Jackson Howard, Schulman told me, she made an immediate request. "The first day I was like, 'Treat me like a 60-year-old man,'" she said. "And he did!" Since then, their relationship has been "great."

Howard laughed when I asked if he remembered the exchange. He said he was "probably trembling" at the time. Howard is 26, and he'd admired Schulman's work since reading *After Delores* in a college class called Bad Homosexuals—but it was more than that. "Sarah has a reputation for being a hard-ass," he recalled of his impression before that first breakfast meeting. "Even in her writing, she is uncompromising. She is cutthroat. She does not back down from her positions." He sought to win her trust, knowing that he represented the kind of institution that traditionally had not been on her side. "I mean, she is somebody who's made a career out of conflict and out of confrontation and out of provocation—but never for the sake of doing it."

In this sense, *Conflict Is Not Abuse* is "a really good window into her," Villarosa told me. "I think she wants to tell you, 'It's okay for us to have conflicts.'" Perhaps the need for reassurance is somewhat generational. "In the '90s, that was big—in ACT UP, people were just coming to blows, practically, and I think now people are more afraid of conflict than we were back then."

Schulman's comfort with conflict is well known. (In 2005, she was the subject of a write-up in the *Times* with the headline "Who's Afraid of Sarah Schulman?" that now reads as arguably sexist and startlingly snide.) "I think what people don't as much understand about her is that she's very kind,"

Villarosa said. She is a frequent dinner guest at Schulman's home, where meals are planned generously and guests' assistance is refused. "You schlep up however many floors to get to her place in that tiny apartment," Villarosa told me. "Her bedroom is an inch away from the living room, you know, but it's like a salon, going to her house, because there will always be a couple of other smart people over there."

The last time Villarosa was over, it was Lydia Polgreen and Rankine. (Rankine and Schulman also talk on the phone every Sunday.) Schulman once hosted Villarosa's mother after she and Linda debated whether queer people are inevitably let down by their families; Villarosa had insisted (contra Schulman's convictions about familial homophobia) that her mother was one of her best friends. Sometime later, Schulman asked Villarosa whether she could invite "Mrs. V" to dinner. Mrs. V and Schulman had a lovely time and talked at length about the theater. "She just loves to get people in a room to talk about ideas and to sit and help her expand her mind," said Villarosa. "And also to give her opinions, and I really, really appreciate that about her."

"My experience is that she's interested in the thing that is interesting to you," said Matt Brim, a friend who, like Schulman, teaches at CUNY's College of Staten Island. "She wants to know how you're thinking about it. She wants to encourage you to think as well as you can about the thing you're thinking about." A few years ago, Schulman invited Villarosa to give a lecture about the reporting she'd done on HIV/AIDS over the years. "She has such high standards, so I wanted to do a really good job," Villarosa said. She went back to her earliest work for *Essence* in the '80s and carried through to the present, describing the ongoing danger of HIV/AIDS for gay and bisexual Black men in the South. Schulman found the material arresting. After the lecture, "she sat me down and she said, 'This is really important. You need to do something else with this.'" Villarosa had assumed what she was saying was familiar; Schulman was adamant that it was news. "And that became my first cover story for *The New York Times Magazine*," Villarosa said.

merritt k told me she saw *Conflict Is Not Abuse* as most valuable within small communities—queer communities, radical communities, whose members can't afford to turn on one another. For them, it conveyed a message that "hey, guys, if we're running around trying to take each other out constantly, that's not a good place to be." Before the lockdown, merritt would go over to Schulman's apartment every few months. There, Schulman would pour her a glass of

**Highbrow.**  
**Lowbrow.**  
**Despicable.**  
**Brilliant.**

NEW  
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whiskey and they'd talk about what they each were working on. "I don't know if she would like this," Merritt said, "but I kind of think of her as my queer mom."

**F**OR SCHULMAN, the classroom is a microcosm where it's possible to apply the book's principles on a manageable scale. "In a healthy educational forum," she writes in *Conflict Is Not Abuse*, "students engage materials regardless of agreement or comfort level and then analyze, debate, critique, and learn from them, addressing the discomfort as well as the text." For this reason, in the classroom, she has a "no censorship" rule. "Students can engage any subject, event, or character and use any language that they feel is appropriate," she writes. "Any student who has criticism, insight, or objection to these elements has the equal right to express their views in detail. This has been my policy for sixteen years without a single complaint."

Schulman often teaches a Friday-night fiction class from 6:30 to ten. "So my students have worked all week, they've taken care of their kids, and they're coming to write fiction on Friday night," she said. With the pandemic, her students' challenges are more apparent than ever. "Their children are home from school, their parents are unemployed, they don't have good Wi-Fi, and also they don't always want their families to hear what their class discussions are like," she told me.

She has found that teaching at a working-class institution like hers can clarify the debates of campus culture. "No one has ever asked for a trigger warning," she said. "It's a very entitled position to believe that you have the right and the ability to control other people." When she visits other schools, the contrast is stark. She told me she remembered an exchange that followed a talk she once gave at Columbia. "There was a girl there who was Black, and she was from Queens, and she was saying, 'In my neighborhood, I was taught to be resilient. And then I come to Columbia, and they say you should be protected. Which is better? Resilient or protected?'" For Schulman, the answer was obvious. "I was like, 'Resilient!'"

As she was writing the book, she did not expect trigger warnings or "cancel culture" to become focal points of discussion. "I didn't even really know about cancel culture," Schulman told me. "I didn't know the phrase." But her talks and readings from the book drew the largest audiences of her career; the crowds were young, "and that's what they wanted to talk about." Now she sees a document like the recent "Letter on Justice and Open Debate" published in *Harper's* as a "classic example," she said, of

the dynamic she described in her book: People from a "dominant culture feel threatened" and are reacting as if danger is afoot.

"The idea of free speech is being co-opted by the right," she told me. "The answer is more speech, not less." The risk of trying to limit speech, in her view, is that limitations will always be turned against the most vulnerable first. She pointed to the tendency to link speech in defense of Palestinians with anti-Semitism—a rhetorical move favored by, for example, Cary Nelson and Bari Weiss, who numbered among the signatories of the *Harper's* letter. (Last year, Weiss was photographed at home, a copy of *Conflict Is Not Abuse* visible on her shelf. She told me she had not read the book and that it was a gift.)

When Schulman and I first spoke in early March, she was optimistic about "the big-tent movement" the Bernie Sanders campaign looked poised to assemble. "Well, you know," she said when we spoke this summer, "there is a big-tent coalition in the street." In the months since, the world had by most accounts fallen apart, fragmenting in ways that appeared shocking even as the pattern of the fault lines was familiar. *Victimhood* and *threat* were terms once again up for grabs—as federal agents turned tear gas on peaceful protesters, as entrenched elites ran for cover. Collective failures of communication and understanding—on matters as seemingly innocuous as germ theory—became more apparent and more dire.

Nearly four years after publishing a book that argued strenuously against calling the police, Schulman was pleased to see more people coming around to the idea. And the spasms of self-scrutiny shaking institutions across the country struck her as a somewhat predictable turn of events. "They wanted to bring in people of color and keep the organization the same—and that's an unreasonable demand," she said. "If the demand is that every cultural institution should be controlled by people of color, I'm fine with that."

A lifetime of activism has left her with a complex appreciation for the practical matter of demands. "I'm very concretely focused," she said. "I like when movements have reasonable, winnable, and doable demands and build campaigns toward them. But those kinds of movements are the most successful when they're also simultaneously utopian movements." The spirit that animates Schulman's work, a sense of risk and possibility in difference, seems all the more urgent now—and all the more difficult to conjure. "The fact that something could go wrong does not mean we are in danger," as she writes in the first chapter of *Conflict Is Not Abuse*. "It means that we are alive." ■



# The Elementary of Surprise

New York Crossword by Matt Gaffney

|     |     |     |     |    |    |    |     |     |    |    |    |    |     |     |    |    |     |     |     |
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| 120 |     |     |     |    |    |    | 121 |     |    |    |    |    |     |     |    |    |     |     | 123 |

- 8 Round of applause
- 9 “\_\_\_ okay!”
- 10 Vodka + cranberry juice
- 11 Matt with eight gold medals
- 12 \_\_\_ del Mar, Chile
- 13 Studies very carefully
- 14 Certain game modification
- 15 Unbroken
- 16 Barclays Center team
- 17 Members pay them
- 18 Light on one’s feet
- 24 Peace Nobelist Wiesel
- 25 God of wisdom
- 31 Exist
- 33 Renaissance-festival instruments
- 34 Difficult, unpleasant tasks
- 35 Deck that includes the Magician
- 36 Noted Tottenham fan
- 37 Prayer leaders
- 38 Maker of Denali airplanes
- 39 Share a view
- 40 Many joggers carry them
- 41 Guest-book entries
- 43 Weaver played her in “Gorillas in the Mist”
- 44 “Lemme think...”
- 48 Prefix for pop or punk
- 49 Dryers trap it
- 50 Marrakech dish
- 51 Quotable puncher
- 54 Tony of “Taxi”
- 55 Liechtenstein’s location
- 56 Lose tautness
- 58 Gulf
- 61 Best Picture nominee in 2018
- 64 Like extroverts
- 67 Mariah Carey can carry one
- 68 Opposite of “alway”
- 69 “A Christmas Story” present
- 70 Blot out
- 71 “What’s up?” in Wuhan
- 73 Beat at boxing, briefly
- 74 Travel around
- 76 City known for mustard
- 77 Baker from Detroit
- 78 Third-to-last country alphabetically
- 80 Find by chance
- 81 Ill will
- 83 Color close to ecru
- 86 Highway ticketer
- 91 Gary Cooper, in a WWI film
- 92 “Now I understand” sounds
- 93 Paid for everyone’s drinks
- 95 Flower girls, often
- 96 Proved one’s sketchiness
- 97 Two-syllable unit
- 98 Goal off a corner kick, often
- 99 Noted novel of 1815
- 102 Fire-truck feature
- 103 Employment
- 104 Where many learn archery
- 105 Ilhan in the House
- 106 Spend some time out
- 108 Zip, in Oaxaca
- 109 Rural road
- 110 Delish, to Dominicans
- 111 Not yet out of the tournament
- 112 Fragile food
- 115 Word in wedding announcements

**Across**

- 1 Cabinet member since 2019
- 5 Notre-Dame’s style
- 11 Rival of Hanes
- 14 Stags’ mates, in England
- 19 “I Got You Babe” instrument
- 20 List of mistakes
- 21 Rightmost number on sundials
- 22 Outdo in a petty way
- 23 What comedian Sarah eats her cereal with?
- 26 Complete and total
- 27 They may play reggae
- 28 Novelists O’Brien and Ferber
- 29 Like Sophia on “The Golden Girls”
- 30 Legal claims
- 31 Word with rain or reflux
- 32 Part of GE
- 34 Gawking type
- 37 Drapery some hipster hangs where there’s no window?
- 42 “Downton Abbey” address
- 43 Was so mad
- 45 Words to a backstabber
- 46 Admissions officer’s consideration
- 47 Neighbor of Nev.
- 48 Maui “howdy”

- 50 Part of a mortarboard
- 52 \_\_\_-com
- 53 First-place prizes at the Aquarium Olympics?
- 57 Leave the country, in a way
- 59 Bear \_\_\_ (firm until 2008)
- 60 On a major upswing
- 62 Former Jets owner Leon
- 63 Students may take or pass them in class
- 65 King of Quebec
- 66 Company named for a mountain
- 69 Carmaker Carl
- 72 Artists Against Fracking co-founder, 2012
- 75 Super or Ruby follower
- 79 Thorny plants
- 82 Hole in the ground that’s full of suntan lotion?
- 84 Cry of horror
- 85 Silver lining
- 87 “24” agent
- 88 Comical Carrey
- 89 Recent WHO withdrawer
- 90 Congresswoman Lowey
- 91 Selfless person
- 93 Schlep
- 94 Lamp over a week-old baby’s crib?

- 98 2019 Amazon series about a conquistador
- 100 “Law & Order: SVU” actor
- 101 Chows down on
- 102 Brash dare
- 104 Python expert
- 107 Despised person
- 109 Daughter of Elvis
- 113 Gas station with a torch logo
- 114 Trying to remember how long that leftover pasta has been in the fridge?
- 116 Cornfield configurations
- 117 Poem with a dedicatee, often
- 118 Fail to honor an arrangement
- 119 Device with an atomizer
- 120 Choose, as a button
- 121 Tablet
- 122 Catherine of 61-Down
- 123 Umlaut’s pair

**Down**

- 1 Superior at work
- 2 Sort of
- 3 Gig you may “land”
- 4 Merrymaking
- 5 Maker of mushy food
- 6 Suze who wrote 2011’s “The Money Class”
- 7 Part of LGBTQIA+

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# THE APPROVAL MATRIX

Our deliberately oversimplified guide to who falls where on our taste hierarchies.

## HIGHBROW

● Trump's **dog-whistle** reelection strategy is all he has left.



● Bill Barr, **unbothered** before Congress.



● The end of the **fame-and-cred** indie art dream of Gavin Brown's Enterprise.



● Kerry James Marshall's **bird-appreciation** paintings online at David Zwirner. Karens not allowed!



● AOC **never** pulls her punches.



● These might be the **last years** of the polar bear.

● Federal troops turn Portland, Oregon, into a war zone. Which **rebellious liberal city** is next?

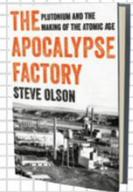


● The Emmys snub **every trans actor** on Pose but recognize Baby Yoda ...

● If you're too afraid to visit the Met, sit home and read **Art=**, the museum's enormous coffee-table book.



● *The Apocalypse Factory*, Steve Olson's history of a rural Washington town crucial to the birth of **nukes**.



● Adriana Loureiro Fernández's series "**Paraíso Perdido**" at the Bronx Documentary Center's Latin American Foto Festival.



● Tom Cotton seems like an "**unnecessary evil**."



● Troy Young, who blew up Hearst magazines, **blows** himself up.



● Did **anybody** ever shop at that Neiman's in Hudson Yards anyway?



● ... But at least the entirely too prescient *Watchmen* gets the **most noms** this year.



● John Waters, **pope** of trash, is the face of Saint Laurent.



● *A Star Is Bored*, a **wacky** novel by Carrie Fisher's former personal assistant Byron Lane.



● Venice Film Festival **masks up**, and the show will go on ...

● That extra \$600 unemployment benefit ends because people definitely aren't still **unemployed** in record numbers.



● The *New York Times* lets us in on how tricky it is to turn a **country house** into a pandemic home ...

## SERIAL

● ... And also acquires the company behind *Serial*, a match made in **media-monopoly** heaven.



● ... While movie studios strike deals so you can stream new releases faster, since you still can't **leave** your apartment, maybe ever.

## DESPICABLE

## BRILLIANT

● Even if you don't have 13 million followers like Chrissy Teigen, it's probably a good idea to skip tweeting that **joke** about somebody who was just shot.



● The Chainsmokers. In the Hamptons. With a DJ set by the **CEO** of Goldman Sachs.



● *Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy!* redo their sets and **resume** production ...



● Aparna from *Indian Matchmaking*'s hatred of **literally everything**.



● After 52 years of serving **plantain fried rice**, Cuban-Chinese staple La Caridad 78, closes ...

● A (flattering) black-and-white **selfie** to show just how woke you are ...



● ... Unrelated: Martha Stewart would like you to know she owns a pool and **looks good** in it.



● NBA in the (hopefully) coronavirus-free **Magic Kingdom**.



● ... And so does the **innovative** Indonesian spot Bali Kitchen.

● Turns out Ellen's "**Be kind**" motto wasn't strictly enforced.



● Taylor Swift finally **nails** a queer song without queer-baiting.



● **97-degree** weather ...

● ... **98-degree** weather ...



● Zipping around on Revel scooters can—big surprise—**kill you**.

● ... And then Con Ed emails you warning that it's so hot you **might lose power**.



● With an outbreak in the Miami Marlins clubhouse, the **MLB season** is already off to a rough start ...



● ... Meanwhile, the president **makes up** Yankees invite.



● *P-Valley*'s **gravity-defying** pole dances.



● Ex-Deadspin staffers start spinoff site, *Defector*, after their old one was run into the ground by a **herb** named Jim Spanfeller.



● The artist formerly known as **Sporty Spice**'s new single.

● Outerspace, Bushwick's **tropical-themed** pandemic-friendly picnic-table restaurant.



## LOWBROW

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118 Forest Drive, Short Hills. \$3,300,000. 8 5.2 | 1.21AC



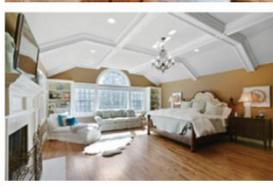
275 Hobart Avenue, Short Hills. \$3,118,000. 5 6.1 | 1.0AC



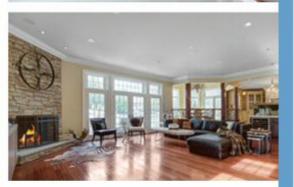
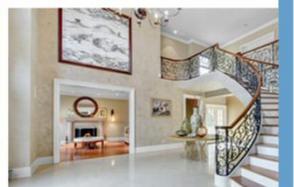
165 Long Hill Drive, Short Hills. \$3,099,000. 6 5.1 | .55AC



50 Hilltop Road, Short Hills. \$2,895,000. 6 7.1 | .59AC



35 Lakeview Avenue, Short Hills. \$2,875,000. 5 5.2 | .69 AC



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